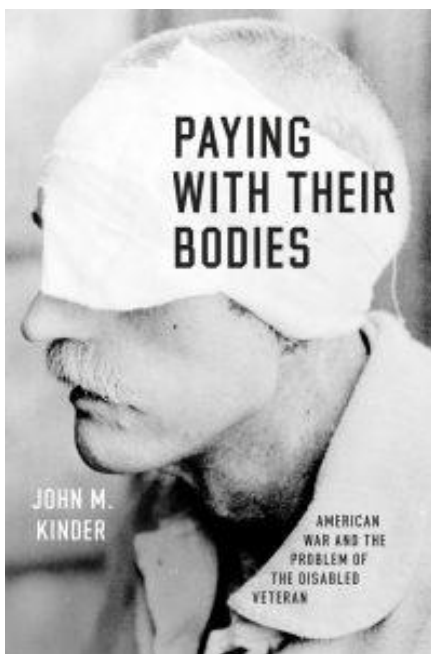


Toward a New Veteranology

Book Review: *Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran*

By Susan Smith (Independent Scholar)



In the Epilogue of his book, [*Paying with Their Bodies: American War and the Problem of the Disabled Veteran*](#), John M. Kinder calls for a “New Veteranology.”¹ What Kinder means by a New Veteranology is “the development of an interdisciplinary body of research on disabled veterans and their problems” that is “rooted in the ideals and activism of the disability

rights movement.” Consequently, as Kinder goes on to argue, this New Veteranology entails “discarding the medical model of disability in favour of a more nuanced understanding of the ways disability functions as an ‘elastic social category shaped and reshaped by cultural values, societal arrangements, public policies, and professional practices.” Therefore, “in keeping with the disability rights mantra, ‘Nothing about Us without Us,’” Kinder asserts that “[i]n today’s veteranology all parties must formally recognize disabled veterans’ agency, both individual and collective, to determine their treatment, rehabilitation, and future endeavours.”

This demand for a disability centred interdisciplinary approach to rehabilitation is the outcome of a well-researched and carefully considered account of the disabled veteran in modern American history. Primarily focusing on World War I and the white male soldier (although Kinder does consider the complexity of race and gender),* Kinder draws a correlation between the veteran of the Great War and that of today’s “Global War on Terror.” Here, Kinder aims to demonstrate how little has changed in the disabled veteran’s use, treatment, and representation by medical

institutions, political organizations and pro- and anti-war groups since WWI. *Paying with Their Bodies* also provides a platform from which to propose a shift in attitudes toward and treatment of disabled veterans. Structurally, Kinder's book comprises an introduction and eight chapters, each of which opens with a brief historical vignette. The chapters are spread across four themed sections. In the first section, "The Industrialization of Injury," Chapters One and Two discuss the rise of the disabled veteran in history as a national problem. Here, Kinder considers the social and economic anxieties surrounding the mass production of wounded men during WWI. In the second section, titled, "The Aftermath of Battle," Chapters Three and Four cover the post-war American desire to reinstate normalcy and the subsequent emergence of the rehabilitation movement. In the third section, titled, "Mobilizing Injury," Chapters Five, Six and Seven start with a critical evaluation of the historic forging of disabled veterans as a coherent political group demanding rights for effective social integration and access to medical care. These chapters also describe the use of the disabled war veteran in society by both pro- and anti-war propaganda groups that desired to further the interests of individual and factional campaigns. Finally, in the fourth section, "Old Battle, New Wars," Chapter Eight and the Epilogue consider the implications and impact of the historic treatment of the disabled war veteran on today's wounded soldiers, which finally leads to Kinder's call for a New Veteranology.

Within the remit of his book, Kinder provides an impressive and fascinating disability studies account of the "social construction" of the war veteran in American history. In the "Introduction," Kinder explains that the "social construction" of the war veteran is meant "[i]n the broadest sense," in which "disability has less to do with physical or mental

impairments than with the meanings a society assigns it." As Kinder states, the term, "social construction" considers "how disabled vets are constructed as problems within American culture – problems to be solved, problems to be exposed, and problems to be ignored." Significantly, by historically situating the war veteran as a "problem," Kinder demonstrates how a newly emerging rehabilitation movement during and after WWI created and endorsed a hierarchy of disability. For example, in a post-war era that desired a return to normalcy, the rehabilitation and recovery of the wounded soldier was only of value if he could conform to society's normative vision of an independent and economically productive able-bodied man. Consequently, as Kinder argues, the ability to survive modern warfare and return to a life of normalcy depended upon technological advances made in modern medicine. Paradoxically however, the expectation placed on modern medicine to rehabilitate successfully the war veteran served to perpetuate further the justification of America's military endeavours abroad. For instance, if a soldier could be fixed by medical technology, then the cost of his personal pain and sacrifice (as well as the perceived economic cost to the nation to rehabilitate him) was considered a price worth paying. Consequently, as Kinder explains, "the decades surrounding World War I marked the United States" most sustained examination of the relationship between disability and the nation's future military endeavours... More so than ever before, Americans looked to disabled soldiers to gauge the long-term legacies of military conflict in national life." Indeed, as Kinder argues, the wounded soldier and his recovery conveniently served as an analogy for the U.S.'s concerns about war. In particular, America's anxieties, fears, and hopes about its involvement in a war overseas and its effects at home were mapped onto the vulnerable body of the wounded soldier. As a result, Kinder argues, veterans

were ultimately reduced to a mere symbol for pro- and anti-war propaganda purposes.

Kinder's book is not an indictment of rehabilitation or the important advances and developments made in medical technology that have served to alleviate the devastating and painful life altering effects of the disabled veteran's war induced injuries. On the contrary, Kinder's book appreciates the fact that rehabilitation is a complex "societal arrangement" of "professional practices" that at once tends to the immediate needs of a nation's wounded, as well as being a profession that is economically and ideologically pressed to offer "a vision of American war without American cripples." What Kinder is critical of is the way in which rehabilitation medicine has rarely criticized America's war culture or demonstrated interest in "wiping out the root causes of war injuries." Instead of a critical politics of rehabilitation, which, Kinder argues, would question America's foreign policies, practitioners are socially and culturally conditioned to promote the progress of medical technology that sanctions America's military culture through the promise of a post-disability future. For example, in today's War on Terror, a post-disability future is somewhat aptly imagined in science fiction. Citing James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), a film in which the consciousness of Sully, a young disabled soldier is transferred into the able body of an alien known as a Na'vi, Kinder considers the pervasive and persuasive power of culture to produce a text that strongly conveys "its faith in the power of advanced technology to curtail, if not eliminate, the functional limitations of bodily impairment." As Kinder points out, the tendency to gloss over the reality of war and its effects on the human body by portraying the American soldier as at once vulnerable and yet invincible continues in popular culture today. Healthcare professions often collude in or do very little

to counter this construction.

Kinder is right to state that the rehabilitation of the disabled war veteran is primarily promoted through militaristic fantasies of wounded soldiers who are miraculously healed and repaired by the power of technology. However, as he also argues, the reality of how veterans have been treated in history certainly differs from science fiction fantasies of miraculous rehabilitation. So what does Kinder's critique of the social and cultural treatment of the war veteran bring to rehabilitation medicine? First, Kinder provides a comprehensive historical account of developments in military and medical technology, convincingly representing a nation's concerns about the soldier wounded in wars both past and present. Second, as a consequence of a disability studies approach, Kinder offers fascinating insight into how American society has responded to and treated the war veteran, often for purposes that go far beyond the immediate needs and concerns of individual soldiers and their families. Third, and most importantly, Kinder's shift from a medical model to a social model of disability means that it is possible to evaluate disabled veterans and their rehabilitation in all their historical, political and cultural complexity. As a result, Kinder offers rehabilitation medicine a space in which to reflect upon and re-evaluate its own history as well as continued social and cultural practices. Overall, the goal of *Paying with Their Bodies* is to nudge professions such as rehabilitation medicine towards a New Veteranology that is critical of the historical as well as present-day conditions that are the outcome of America's ongoing fascination with and involvement in global military conflicts.[†] Therefore, by raising awareness of institutional practices, Kinder invites rehabilitation to counter its own post-disability visions of "the unrelenting march of technoprogress" and "biotechnological transcendence" of the war veteran's

disabled body. Finally, as Kinder demands, this means that “[...] [a] New Veteranology must seek to educate the public about the social, psychological, and physical consequences of war—and its aftermath—without resorting to stigmatization or sentimentality.”

Importantly, while Kinder requests that rehabilitation medicine re-evaluate its attitude, he also questions the veteran’s own historic disability elitism. For example, for much of America’s modern and contemporary history the demand by veterans for special treatment has served to elevate their needs above those of disabled civilians. In a shifting social and historical context in which warfare has moved from state initiative to private enterprise, the war veteran’s activism, which rightly demands access to better medical treatment and more sophisticated social networks, must now, in order not to be forgotten or to become marginalized, work harder to forge political coalitions with disabled civilians.

Overall, Kinder’s effort to change attitudes toward veterans primarily targets rehabilitation professionals, whom he urges “to think critically and comprehensibly about the disabled veteran”—a need, which he argues, is “as pressing as ever.” For instance, as he goes on to explain, in a world in which “globalization is [invariably] accompanied by military conflict,” a New Veteranology must seek “not only to improve the lives of disabled veterans but also to ask tough questions about the cultural values underlying so much of the work [done] on veterans’ behalf.” Certainly, as Kinder asserts, in a cultural climate in which “[...] Americans remain seduced by war—as a proving ground for masculinity, a vehicle for progressive change, and a stage upon which to exhibit national power,” a New Veteranology must be grounded in a “healthy scepticism about the narrative and mythologies that continue to perpetuate America’s culture of war.”

Kinder’s book is an invaluable contribution to studies of the disabled veteran. Crucially, Kinder’s critical disability studies framework brings a fresh perspective to an already research-saturated topic. The most significant of Kinder’s interventions is his call for the radical transformation of rehabilitation medicine. Therefore, *Paying with Their Bodies* is an important addition to the likes of David A. Gerber’s *Disabled Veterans in History* (2000)² and David Serlin’s *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (2004).³ Overall, *Paying with Their Bodies* is a starting point and resource for those who wish to respond to Kinder’s call for a “New Veteranology”—a call that challenges America’s continued fascination with war and its creation of the disabled war veteran as problem.

Footnotes

- * Kinder explains that due to the gender and racial disparities of the US military, the American soldier was predominantly white and male and therefore historically dominated discourses and representations of the war veteran. Therefore, as Kinder also argues, this meant that the white male soldier was a *primary* problem of postwar society and presented as a figure that threatened to hamper “the nation’s economic growth and well-being” as well as becoming “an opportunity for affirmative action” and an excuse “to shore up the social and economic privileges of white men.”
- † For instance, Kinder notes that the “signature wound” of the Global War on Terror is TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury).

References

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2. Gerber DA. *Disabled Veterans in History*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press;
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About the Author



Susan Smith is an Independent Scholar living in Leicester in the UK. Susan has an interest in representations of disability and the cyborg soldier in American science fiction. To date she has completed Bachelor and Master degrees in the arts and humanities and a PhD thesis with the English Department at the University of Leicester in 2010 titled: 'Shifting (A)Genders: Gender, Disability and the Cyborg in American Women's Science Fiction.' More recently, Susan has had a book chapter published in Dr. David Bolt's, Changing Social Attitudes Toward Disability: Perspectives from historical, cultural, and educational studies (2014), titled: 'Altered Men: War, Body Trauma, and the Origins of the Cyborg Soldier in American Science Fiction.' Susan also has a journal article in a Medical Humanities: BMJ Special Edition, Science Fiction and the Medical Humanities, titled: "Limbitless Solutions:" the Prosthetic Arm, Iron Man and the Science Fiction of Technoscience' (2016). She has produced book reviews for Foundation: The International Review of Science Fictional and for the Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies, in which she has a forthcoming article for publication in November 2017, titled: "Human Form Does Not Make A Human Creature": The Autistic Male Human Machine in Marge Piercy's He, She and It.' Susan believes that a critical disability approach to the medical humanities plays a vital role in analyzing historical perspectives on disability and medicine. She also believes that the presence of critical disability studies in the humanities is essential for contributing to ongoing public and professional discourses that shape ethical decisions made in biotechnology and rehabilitation medicine.



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