



PROJECT MUSE®

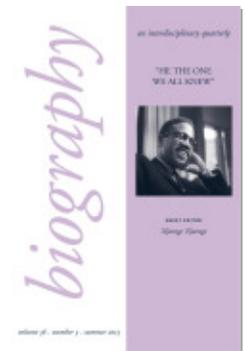
Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina (review)

Alyce Cook

Biography, Volume 27, Number 4, Fall 2004, pp. 859-862 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: 10.1353/bio.2005.0001



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bio/summary/v027/27.4cook.html>

American testimonial works, written by men and women, with English translations where available.

Catherine Davies

Susana Rotker. *Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. 236 pp. ISBN 0-8166-4030-0, \$18.95.

Susana Rotker's analysis of the historical phenomenon of widespread kidnapping of white women by Argentine Indians in the nineteenth century is an important addition to scholarship treating the "disappearing" of racial diversity from the discourse of nation building in Argentina. Although Rotker is unable to provide these women a history, she succeeds in accounting for their disappearance from the historical record. It is important to note that in that manner, she names the vanishing of the captivity experience as part of its actual historical occurrence, thereby linking the undocumented lives of women kidnapped from Argentina's internal frontier to more recent silences in historical archives—the disappearance of men, women, and children who were tortured and murdered during the Argentine military regime that was in power from 1976 to 1983, and the silence of the Holocaust victims. As Jean Franco notes in the book's foreword, Susana Rotker's personal history links *Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina* to survivors' grief, and to the grief of children who, like Rotker, have been deprived of family memory: a child of Jewish refugees, Susana Rotker was born in Argentina, grew up in Venezuela with no family memories to claim, and then returned to Argentina during the dirty war when revelations of torture, death, and disappearance were a regular occurrence, and the issues of memory and amnesia were fiercely disputed.

Captive Women is Jennifer French's translation of Susana Rotker's 1999 Spanish language original *Cautivas: Olvidos y memoria en la Argentina*. It is divided into core chapters, a forward by Jean Franco, informative chapter notes, a bibliography, and a useful index. The temporal span of the book begins with Esteban Echeverría's *La cautiva* (1837). A review of letters written from the internal frontier during the nineteenth century, and an examination of Argentina's only known first-person captivity narrative, *Memorias del ex cautivo Santiago Avedaño* (1850–60), follow. The final chapters of the book include an analysis of accounts regarding Argentina's legendary captive, Lucía Miranda, and a study of memory and modernity in Lucío V. Mansilla's *Una excursión a los indios ranqueles* (1870).

The first chapter, "Against Oblivion," introduces the theoretical approaches to memory that Rotker employs in her project, and establishes the text's initial premise that a study of the poetics of memory is also a study regarding pacts of silence. Here, she draws upon the work of Sande Cohen and Matt Matsuda to affirm the central elements of her effort: 1) to question why a given phenomenon does or does not enter into the system of writing we call History, and 2) to read the past with a spirit of doing justice to those who have been forgotten.

In Chapter 2, "In Conquest of a White Nation," Rotker seeks to understand the establishment of Argentina as a discursively white nation by reviewing narratives that constitute its foundation. Her examination of José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* and Domingo F. Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* calls attention to a system included in both works that is designed to "disappear" the marginal non-urban populations of indigenous peoples, blacks, and captive women in order to permit the dreamed of identity equating Buenos Aires with Paris. Rotker's argument regarding the custom of erasing social fringes that do not correspond to the desired national self-image also demonstrates that the suppression of fragments of the past (or present) from the historical record is a "strategy for avoiding the negotiation that emerges from political interaction" (35).

"No One Mourns for the Captives: The Soldiers," Chapter 3, endeavors to reconstruct the real situation of the captive women from memoirs of soldiers on the frontier. In considering the ramifications of silence, Rotker acknowledges that because captivity is synonymous with disappearance, the tales that exist are insufficient to recuperate reality or to reproduce in memory the experience of the confrontation between cultures. In Argentina, unlike other countries where there were captives, there are no public registers of diaries or testimonies written by the women captives. Rotker's explanation to account for these silences in the historical record is noteworthy: those running the highest risk of capture were female rural settlers with little or no political power, whose loss would have been almost invisible in the rural workforce. In brief, the history of the female captives was of no concern to the lettered elite because the captives' gender and location did not correspond to the image that the lettered elite held of themselves and their country.

The vexing question as to why fictitious captive experiences entered into the collective imaginary rather than the real victims' accounts comes to the fore in Chapters 4 and 5. As Rotker's essays on Echeverría's *La cautiva* (Chapter 4) and works by Rosa Guerra and Eduarda Mansilla (Chapter 5) demonstrate, the invented narratives provided the elites with another weapon against barbarism in their fight to justify their white Europeanizing project. Rotker

convincingly makes the case that because incorporating the voices of the actual victims would have violated the white man's legitimating myth about the land, it was necessary to silence the true accounts of captivity and impose conditions of national homogeneity instead. Importantly, real victims' accounts would have narrated carnal contact with the Indian and a racially mixed population. To the extent that Echeverría's María is obliged to remain chaste and to die almost immediately, civilization is not subjected to the threat of her returning contaminated. Rotker points out that Echeverría's portrayal of María as an absolute victim provides the "civilized" elite with another death to avenge.

Rotker's readings of a pair of rewrites of the Lucía Miranda myth suggest several important consequences. As regards Rosa Guerra's interpretation of the myth, Rotker develops two important themes: 1) Lucía Miranda, contrary to the standard role of women in romantic literature, "evangelizes, carries out works of charity, and manages to save Mangoré's soul before he dies" (109), and 2) the real value of Guerra's version lies in its commentary on the transformative powers of language as mediator between different cultures—the Indians are likeable and Lucía learns to speak their language. Rotker likewise analyzes Eduarda Mansilla's rewrite of the myth apropos the protagonist's involvement with the Indians. As translator between Spanish and Indians, the Lucía of Mansilla's piece is the axis for a number of female friendships that eventually lead to an involvement between the two cultures. Rotker highlights that while Guerra and Mansilla fail to give voice to the real women of the frontier, both of their writings convey a curiosity toward the forbidden and non-representable.

Rotker concludes her study with an analysis of the principles of representation. In Chapters 6 and 7 she takes up letters and memoirs that never appeared as part of the national ideological network. Their authors—former captives, Indians, and relatives of the disappeared or kidnapped—portray a social reality very different from the one handed down in the literary canon. Chapter 8 is an assessment of *Memorias del ex cautivo Santiago Avendaño*, by Lucío Mansilla (brother of Eduarda Mansilla). In addressing the question of why Lucío Mansilla chose to rob the Indians of all historicity and diminish the importance of the captive women, Rotker explores in detail the costs of eroticizing the nation as the body of a woman.

Captive Women is a rich book, filled with specificity and close readings. Susana Rotker has admirably succeeded in exposing the concerted act of forgetting that allowed Argentina to erase the presence of Indians, Africans, and mestizos from its national story. One of the greatest values of this book is the questions it poses regarding the relation between narrative and history,

between writing and memory, and its consideration of the moment when violence and culture clash, in earlier as well as contemporary history.

I was glad to have the opportunity to review the English version of Rotker's book. On November 28, 2000, Susana Rotker met an untimely death that has deprived academia of a talented and passionate scholar. I offer my brief review in homage to her memory.

WORKS CITED

- Cohen, Sande. "Structuralism and the Writing of Intellectual History." *History and Theory* 17.2 (1978): 206.
- Matsuda, Matt K. *The Memory of the Modern*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.

Alyce Cook

Javier Auyero. *Contentious Lives: Two Argentine Women, Two Protests, and the Quest for Recognition*. Durham: Duke UP, 2002. 240 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3115-2, \$18.95.

Contentious Lives, which is sociologist Auyero's second major work in English, analyzes two popular protest movements in Argentina in December 1993 and June 1996. They occurred in Santiago del Estero and Neuquén, two provinces of the country's far interior, north and south respectively of the national capital in Buenos Aires. The former movement, known as the *santiagazo*, seemed the more unusual because the protesters assaulted and burned the state house, the legislature, and several of the homes of leading politicians. The latter movement, called the *pueblada*, became visible in the form of barricades blocking the flow of traffic from the adjacent towns of Cutral-cu and Plaza Huincul in Neuquén. The events of Santiago del Estero remain unique, but the use of barricades manned by so-called *piqueteros* exemplified a form of protest that has become common throughout Argentina since the mid-1990s.

The *santiagazo*, the *pueblada*, and many other protest movements originated in the rapid contraction of the public sector in the 1990s under President Carlos Menem, which provoked rising unemployment and collapsing incomes, especially in the provinces. Menem's "neo-liberal" policies, which embraced currency convertibility as well as privatization en masse, culminated in the staggering economic collapse in Argentina of 2001–2003. A decade previously, however, the bloated public sector that Menem later dismantled had posed serious economic problems in Argentina, and underlay recurrent bouts of hyperinflation. Before retrenchment, in the city of Santiago del Estero, the provincial capital, the public sector employed around half the work