

Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1997)

Sarah Carter's new monograph, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West*, is a dense critical study of the discursive constructions of white and aboriginal femininity in Canada's Prairie West in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Focusing particularly on the 1885 Rebellion and its aftermath, Carter argues that "spatial and social boundaries" were created between the aboriginal and Euro-Canadian communities at least partly through the manipulation of representations of women. By situating her analysis within a colonial framework and employing a post-modern analysis of texts and representations, she demonstrates the ways in which white women were "projected as 'civilizing' agents," while aboriginal women were represented "as dangerous and sinister." (xiii) These contrasting images, she contends, played a crucial role in the colonization of the West and the marginalization of the indigenous population.

She weaves together an array of public sources, published narratives, newspapers and government documents, and combines them with some less-public materials. One of her key texts is the captivity narrative of Theresa Delaney and Theresa Gowanlock, two white women captured by the Cree during the 1885 Rebellion. Some of the most fascinating sections of Carter's book analyze the various metamorphoses which the text, *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear: The Life and Adventures of Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delaney*, underwent as it progressed from oral to written text and then through various printings. With each subsequent version the women's experiences became more horrific, Metis assistance and Cree generosity were increasingly downplayed or eliminated, and so on. Carter argues that "In writing their book – whether or not it was with the assistance of ghostwriters" the two women "had to accord with literary conventions, a discourse of femininity, and a colonial discourse, all of which influence the way their text was produced." (114) She situates their text within a discussion of American captivity narratives while carefully avoiding applying the conclusions of the American literature; the genre was far more common and popular in the United States, and the rhetoric and falsifications that much more extreme.

She compares *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear* with the writings of other white women involved in the 1885 events, before moving on to consider other "captivity hoaxes" of the 1880s and examine the ways in which these tales were deployed. No white women were actually captured by the indigenous population in the West after 1885, but stories were fabricated and circulated by the western press anyway, largely as part of a campaign to even further increase the restrictions against First Nations communities. In southern Alberta, for example, local newspapers created and circulated a story about a white girl

living with the Blackfoot as part of a campaign against the nation's presence and limited rights.

Carter then discusses a range of late-nineteenth-century sources, including some personal papers by white women and missionaries as well as federal publications and newspapers, to probe their representations of aboriginal women. Much of the attention here is focused on the relationship between the North West Mounted Police and native women, and the increasingly marginal place held by native women in white communities in the 1870s and 80s. The white men were rarely held accountable for their "transgressions"; instead, the "licentiousness" of native women was routinely evoked. Layers of images come together in these texts to produce what was perceived as a single, coherent construction of indigenous women as dirty, lazy, promiscuous, and accustomed to brutal treatment from men.

An interesting structure is thus created within her argument: the first half of the book examines representations of white women at risk from native men, and the second half of the book discusses representations of native women and the dangers they posed to white men. In the first half white women are represented in terms of their vulnerability to the violence, particularly sexual violence, of native men, and in the second half the white men are prey for native women. As Carter suggests, "The powerful ideologies of white and Aboriginal femininity functioned to inform both groups of their appropriate space and place." (205) One is struck, at times, by just how separate these spaces and places seem to be. These constructions are largely being created by non-resident white men about two groups of imaginary women who, even at the level of representation, appear to interact very little and rarely inhabit the same discursive or real terrain. If, as Carter concludes, the images of each group are being used as weapons against the other, one can only speculate about the actual social and spatial limits which were established between aboriginal and white women when the representations of each group imply that there was little contact as it was. Interestingly enough, although the defining features of each set of representations did depend on the other, the representations themselves were played out most frequently against those of the men of the other group.

A more telling question, however, concerns the extent to which Carter's conclusions can be extended beyond the 1880s. The 1885 Rebellion and the narrative of Delaney and Gowanlock were relatively unique "events," particular moments in the history of the budding Canadian nation-state's consolidation of its control over the West. How far, then, can they go towards representing the closing decades across the West? What discourses were already in place before 1885, what representations already held currency in the mind's eye of Euro-Canadians? Did the late 1880s allow existing representations to coalesce, or were strikingly new ones created to serve the needs of the moment? Either way, by 1900 the Euro-Canadian imagination had ceased working overtime to demonize the native population of the Prairie West because they had been confined

more or less effectively to their reserves and thus removed from the public's eye.

*Capturing Women* contributes to several fields of North American historiography. Like her 1990 monograph *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*, it is a solid addition to the history of native-white relations in Canada. It also speaks to the North American historiography on the discursive constructions of race and gender, and the growing international literature on colonialism. This is one book whose excellence simply cannot be judged by its cover: the softcover has a 1993 photo of a white woman in a white wedding dress and an aboriginal man dressed in red. To the man's right we see an interior wall; to the woman's left a hazy prairie horizon. It is a cleverly manipulated image and a striking one in its own right, but reveals little about the work's actual subject matter.

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#### CALL FOR PAPERS

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