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Review of *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* By Sarah Carter

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Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West. By Sarah Carter. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997. Photographs, illustrations, notes, index. xviii+ 247 pp. \$55.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Capturing Women, an extended essay examining the role of Indian captivity narratives in racializing prairie society, is a welcome addition to prairie history, which has been particularly resistant to gender and race analysis. In this small volume Sarah Carter takes up both of these subjects in the context of nineteenth-century imperialism. Beginning with a close reading of *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear: The Life and Adventures of Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delany*, she shows how captivity narrative was used to re-establish white male authority in the aftermath of what has become known as the Second Riel Rebellion in 1885.

Published within months of the Frog Lake "massacre," *Two Months* is Canada's only authentic captivity narrative. Proclaimed to be an eyewitness account by Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delany, it recounts the violent events at Frog Lake that left nine men dead, including Gowanlock's and Delany's husbands, and the two widows "captives" of the offending Cree. But, as Carter points out, *Two Months* follows the prescribed forms and political purposes of imperial literature generally.

Constructed around the imagined threat of aboriginal men to white men's ownership and control of white women's sexuality—what

Robert J. C. Young in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995) calls the “‘spermatic economy’ of imperialism” — captivity narratives served to solidify racial boundaries and justify the use of force against indigenous peoples. Carter emphasizes this point by reminding the reader that the release of *Two Months* coincided with the hanging of Riel (15 November) and the largest mass execution in Canadian history, the hanging of nine men at Battleford, including those found guilty of the Frog Lake murders (27 November).

Captivity narratives provide fertile ground for exploring the intersections of race and gender in the construction of social power. As products of white male fantasy, however, and its concomitant eroticised fear, they are unreliable for understanding women’s pasts. Carter is careful to point out these problems. Indeed, her title underscores their inevitable effect. The prescribed framework and conventions of captivity narratives dictate that white men emerge as actively shaping history (protecting and defending white women makes the colony safe for “civilization”), while women (white and aboriginal) act out the destiny of their sex. Whether as “fair flower” of pure white womanhood or dangerous and sinister Indian “squaw,” women in these narratives are empty signifiers of men’s power, “captured” by their biology.

Beyond demonstrating the historical constructedness of race and gender, the telling and retelling of race stories also reflect and shore up unstable and shifting social relationships. Rather than fixing social relationships in an immutable past, Australian historian Chris Healy, in *From the Ruins of Colonialism* (1997), argues that captivity narratives operate as “memory work” or “cultural performance” by which the past is made present and available in particular forms and settings. From this perspective, the reasons why the prairie west produced the only authentic captivity narrative published in Canada deserves further exploration. Other

European colonies generated many such stories that often persisted as central founding myths. Carter does an excellent job of showing that Canadian Indian atrocity stories, authentic and fake, bare the marks of colonialism in general. It is less clear what prairie captivity narratives reveal of specific forms of colonialism and their legacies in western Canada.

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