

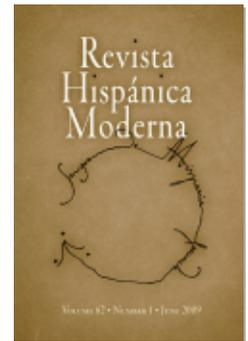


PROJECT MUSE®

Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives
(review)

Brendan Lanctot

Revista Hispánica Moderna, Volume 62, Number 1, June 2009, pp. 121-124
(Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhm.0.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/265379>

symptomatic” type, examining the literary works in terms of their more or less direct capacity to elucidate political and sexual dynamics, or facts, of Arenas’s final years. Toward the end of his study, Ocasio alludes to the possibilities of a more expansive, or nuanced, fiction-centered approach when he briefly comments on the inextricability of fiction and biographical fact in Arenas’s life and work. One wonders what additional insights or critiques Ocasio might have offered if he had taken a little more seriously the comment made by Arenas to his friend Perla Rozencaig which appears toward the end of the final chapter: “that [literary] character I’ve left in my books is the meaning of my life” (149). The statement, made just a few days before his death, seems almost like an epitaph on Arenas’s tomb. Ocasio does not linger over the comment, and one wonders how he might have responded to the implicit challenge it offers to him or any of Arenas’s future biographers. What is that “literary character” and what does it do? What does it say that “Arenas himself” could not? How does it evolve through Arenas’s writings, and what biographically-ungoverned connections might it suggest within its own heterogeneities? How might an exploration of this “character” redirect judicial questions—those aimed at uncovering the truth of biographical referents—toward other dimensions of analysis? In short, one wonders whether Ocasio might not have engaged a bit more fully with this literary character, rather than treating Arenas’ fiction as yet another symptom pointing back to his life and person. One suspects that Arenas’s life, in the nakedness of its documentary evidence, has less to say when it is denied the vital, volatile, testimonial companionship of “that character” that has been “left in [his] books.”

CARL GOOD, *Indiana University, Bloomington*

FERNANDO OPERÉ. *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives*. Trans. Gustavo Pellón. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2008.

In the first chapter of *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives*, Fernando Operé recounts a memorable episode from Garcilaso de la Vega’s *La Florida del Inca*. Diego de Guzmán, who accompanied Hernando de Soto through the present-day southern United States, settles with an Indian wife and refuses to rejoin de Soto’s expedition. Guzmán states his desire to remain by writing his name in charcoal on a letter sent to him by his countrymen. The signature, the letter, and Garcilaso’s retelling of the incident epitomize the focus of Operé’s study: the transmission of writing and bodies across the unstable, shifting frontiers between Amerindian and European cultures. These writings are a testimony to centuries of conflict and acculturation in the Americas, as well as allude to the practical and theoretical difficulties of a project that endeavors to “establish a foundation for constructing a history of captivity” (65).

Published originally as *Historias de la frontera. El cautiverio en la América hispánica* (FCE: 2001), *Indian Captivity* is an eminently readable translation by Gustavo Pellón. On its opening page, Operé positions himself as an advocate of captives, whom he calls “practically unknown supporting actors,” “silent victims,” and

“the forgotten protagonists of the encounter in the New World” (ix). Operé’s contention is that the lacunae in the historical record are the product of a systematic disregard and suppression of subaltern experience throughout Spanish America. Faced with a paucity of firsthand accounts of captivity—particularly notable when compared to the abundance of such narratives in North American literature—he offers a broad corpus that reaches from the North American Southwest to Patagonia and spans nearly five hundred years of history, beginning with Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufragios* and concluding with a consideration of historical novels by Juan José Saer, César Aira, and Abel Posse. The underlying assumption that brings these diverse works together is that their “frontiers” and “captives” share something, an ontology that connects them despite geographical and historical differences. To “recover the voices of those silenced” (xxv) and, in doing so, to reveal their common ground is a formidable undertaking.

In order to carry out this task, Operé divides his book into seven chapters. The first six of these chapters address a particular geographic region and often focus on a specific author or indigenous population. With the exception of the fifth chapter (“The Northern Frontier: From the Chichimecas to the Comanches”), every chapter title contains the word “captivity” or “captive(s),” a curious redundancy that obfuscates the specific intent or problematic of each intervention. Also misleading is the title of the final chapter, “Captives in Literature,” which suggests that the previous sections of the book deal primarily with archival material.

Indian Captivity is at its best when it examines the redaction, publication, and reception of frontier narratives, revealing their dislocation from the events they recount. In other words, the study is most compelling precisely when it calls attention to specific sociopolitical circumstances—often at a significant historical and geographic remove from the occurrence of captivity—that subvert the notion of common frontier space. In Chapter Five, for example, Operé reads Andrés Martínez’s testimony of his captivity with the Kiowas in the context of the proselytizing efforts of the Methodist Reverend J. J. Methvin: “his hand is felt in every narrative, since he infuses them with a purpose that was perhaps not present in the original dictation” (154). As Operé continues to interrogate the editorial intervention of Methvin, the reader is reminded that the personal experiences of Andrés Martínez—or any captive, for that matter—remain necessarily opaque and mediated by the interlocutors and audience of his narrative.

For the most part, though, Operé shifts his focus away from questions of textuality, and instead emphasizes the events depicted in captivity narratives. Frequently he extrapolates from quotes to offer general considerations about indigenous cultures or frontier relations. This method produces interesting conclusions when Operé surveys a body of writings, such as the state-generated declarations produced in nineteenth-century Argentina. It is less effective when he applies the same approach to isolated texts. For example, he contends that a comment in Juan Falcón’s *Declaración* regarding the 1599 attack on Valdivia “reveals the Indians’s [*sic*] desire to integrate women and their bastard children

into Mapuche society” (54).¹ Operé is careful to note the cultural biases and political motivations of these texts, but these observations do not prevent the assertions about frontier life from skirting tautology.

Also unproductive is the occasional effort to understand the experience of captivity in terms of present-day psychology. Following a lengthy quote of Auguste Guinnard’s *Three Years of Slavery among the Patagonians* (originally published in 1864), Operé notes that “[m]odern psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neurology have given the name post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the devastating effects that an extremely threatening or frightening experience can have on the human psyche” (133). In light of this, he concludes that “the experience of adult white males from a culture radically different from that of the Indians, and without previous contact with them [. . .] fits well with this symptomology” (133). It is an empathetic gesture, but one that momentarily sweeps aside the text and historicity in favor of Guinnard’s presumed emotional state. The ironic upshot of the passage is that, by leveling the intended reader and the Frenchman—post captivity—it reduces the frontier to a backdrop of human (read “adult white male”) subjectivity. In general, the movements from specific instances to broader speculation conclude the consideration of a given work and short-circuit readings that might otherwise enrich or complicate the framework that organizes *Indian Captivity*.

In synthesis, Operé’s study consists of close readings on a wide array of captivity narratives, which close with interpretive feints that employ various critical approaches. Thanks to the directness of its prose and its wide-ranging gaze, *Indian Captivity* effectively and enthusiastically conveys the narrative intrigue that many of the works presented contain. At times it is, well, captivating, and would make an excellent template for an undergraduate course based on the themes of imperial and nationalist expansion, frontier encounters, and subaltern experience.

To its detriment, the accumulation of short critical incursions does not sufficiently problematize the field of inquiry in which *Indian Captivity* situates itself. It specifies what texts it examines, but it never cogently argues why or how it engages this particular selection of works. “Frontier” and “captivity” function as the common denominator that brings these texts together, though Operé never reevaluates his provisional definitions of the terms. In other words, the work signals an interest and a need to understand captivity narratives as a corpus that traverses political, cultural, and discursive frontiers in a similar way, but it largely limits itself to considering the relationship between works and the events they represent, not between texts. “Captives in Literature,” the final chapter, calls attention to the thorny issues of intertextuality, though it does so by retracing the arc of the entire book in vertiginous fashion, from Ercilla’s *La Araucana* to contemporary Argentine fiction. The one-to-one mapping of *Indian Captivity* succeeds in recuperating some forgotten voices of individual authors and subjects, but it does so by situating them on a map of Spanish America whose cul-

¹ The original is equally direct: “. . . se traduce en la voluntad de los indios por integrar a las mujeres y sus bastardos al seno de la sociedad mapuche” (91).

tural, historical, and theoretical topographies have been smoothed. At the same time, the book never loses sight of either the scope of its enterprise or the fragmentary nature of its corpus, which lends it the virtue of revealing to a scholarly audience the forking paths of future investigations about Spanish American captivity.

BRENDAN LANCTOT, *University of Puget Sound*