

# The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature

Holly Boomer  
*Black Hills State University*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2010 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

## Recommended Citation

Boomer, Holly. "The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature." *The Annals of Iowa* 69 (2010), 224-225.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1429>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

*The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through the Captivity Literature*, by Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. xxxiv, 363 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth.

Reviewer Holly Boomer is assistant professor of humanities at Black Hills State University. Her dissertation (University of Nebraska, 2000) was "Writing Red: Vine Deloria, Jr. and Contemporary American Indian Fiction."

What is most interesting about Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola's book *The War in Words* is the analysis of events, identity, and perspectives and, maybe most important, the contrast in memory between Natives and non-Natives. This book, focusing on the 1862 Dakota Conflict, creates a dialogue of analysis about captivity and confinement narratives that were predominantly claimed by Euro-Americans to narrate their treatment at the hands of Indians. Little known is that this particular genre was used by Indians as well to narrate their treatment at the hands of non-Natives. The two main sections of the book allow for perspectives from non-Natives and Natives in an attempt to give voice to those missing from historical discourse and to show "individual ideologies and identities within the two groupings" (5).

Derounian-Stodola contends that the contentious perspectives about the 1862 Dakota Conflict have generated numerous narratives that "found their way into print." She uses her book as a forum for individual voices, Native and non-Native, remembering that conflict. She makes the distinction that "memory is often owned; history, interpreted" (20). She also asserts that "the past is created through narrative rather than being translated into narrative" (21) and calls her approach a "path of dialogue" in analyzing these narratives. Her intent, "using different forms of testimony" (2), is to give "equal say and equal space concerning the same war" (13) and to give critical attention to the differences in "the experience and recollection of captivity during the Dakota War" (5). This critical attention to the differences in perspective and memory shows how the outcome and implications of the conflict have reverberated beyond Minnesota, where it took place. Because of the mix of individuals living in Minnesota at the time of the conflict, the objective of spotlighting voices giving different versions of the same conflict allows readers to analyze the threads of testimony and narrative to better understand the historical context of the conflict.

Derounian-Stodola uses ideas from *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, by Shoshana Felman and Doru Laub, M.D., to provide a new lens through which to see how history and biography are not only built from memory but also radically changed by it. Felman and Laub contend that the works they scruti-

nized were “consequent to the historic trauma of the Second World War . . . the watershed of our times . . . not as an event encapsulated in the past . . . but as a history which is essentially *not over* . . . whose traumatic consequences are still actively *evolving*” (Felman and Laub, xiv–xv). This idea is pivotal for understanding the context of the Dakota War, one of many watershed events for Natives, as a historic trauma that is still evolving for Dakota peoples. Derounian-Stodola acknowledges Dakota historian Waziyatawin Angela Wilson’s assertion that the war “remains the major point of demarcation in Dakota history,” and that a combination of factors, including being “severed from the land . . . confined to reservations in new lands . . . suffering disconnection,” forever changed the Dakota’s relationship with the rest of the world (5). The indigenous people living in Minnesota in 1862 were severed from the world as they knew it. Survival and memory make up the bones of captivity narratives that, according to Derounian-Stodola, are “any story with captors . . . and captives” (3).

Thus, survival and bearing witness are credible and validated processes for Euro-Americans but for indigenous Americans there is still a lack of acknowledgment, a discounting of testimony and witness and a disempowerment of voice. There are many pivotal points in history for the large number of American Indians in this country, and the historic trauma for these indigenous groups is not over; the consequences that are still evolving are really the core of understanding indigenous narratives. Derounian-Stodola allows the dialogue and narratives to “speak.” By doing so she has shown the highest respect. Her efforts at leveling the historical playing field by not only giving voice to those Natives who were previously voiceless in history but also by attempting to illustrate how wartime memories are wounds that are interpreted differently by each group because of personal, cultural, and historical context, should not go unnoticed.

*Amorette’s Watch: A Civil War Widow and Her Granddaughter*, by Virginia Foote. Berkeley, CA: Regent Press, 2009. Illustrations. \$20.00 paper.

Reviewer Jane Simonsen is assistant professor of history and women and gender studies at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois. She is the author of *Making Home Work: Domesticity and Native American Assimilation in the American West, 1860–1919* (2006).

*Amorette’s Watch* begins with the story of how Virginia Foote lost a watch that once belonged to her grandmother, Amorette; it was her only tangible inheritance of the ancestor she never knew. The loss spurs an attempt to follow her grandmother along a somewhat faint