B. Sutton, *Surviving State Terror. Women's Testimonies of Repression and Resistance in Argentina*. New York: NYU Press, 2018, 328 pp., US\$35 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jennifer Schirmer

[During]the Process of National Reorganization . . . torture was less a means to acquire information than to damage the mind, traumatize the victims and alter their selves . . . [N]othing prepared people for the inferno they were to enter in 1976. (Robben 2005: 216)

In her book, Barbara Sutton aims to give voice to the female survivors of the Clandestine Detention Centers (CDCs) in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 – voices that have been “silenced” under the repressive and democratic regimes. Fifty-two testimonies from the *Memoria Activa* Oral Archive, established in 1999 in Buenos Aires, pinpoint the agony of sexualized torture, rape, sexual slavery, impregnation, forced abortions and miscarriages (often resulting from torture), and the appropriation of babies born to women in captivity (125–6). Rejecting the tropes of victim or maternal saint, Sutton insists small “acts of resistance” should be seen as “political”, indicating the multiple ways detainees endured and survived (10). A “pedagogy of survival” included “embodied performances”: a *cara de ni* (a neither face) – neither yes nor no – during forced *paseos* to “finger” comrades on the street, turning active into passive collaboration (156).

This notable corrective to our understanding of women’s resistance notwithstanding, Sutton’s book evidences a problematic often found in gendered and embodied studies. She recognizes that women’s past “social and political activism was an integral aspect of [their] testimonies” and that their “background infused their experience in the camps [and] their survival strategies” (5). Yet, the more than 16 socially active and revolutionary groups these women belonged to in the 1960s and 1970s are delegated to a footnote, with little apparent interest in how these women’s responses to their horrific detention and torture were influenced by their different political ideologies and experiences. Surprisingly, Sutton ignores how these women self-identify by naming them all “activists” or “a seasoned political activist”, rather than Monteneras, Peronist Youths, trade unionists or university students, among many other categories. Rather, her interest lies in how they “endured and/or resisted despite the devastation” *as women* (101). Yet, we learn 193 pages into the book that *Memoria Activa*’s Oral Archive project from which all her testimonies are drawn is dedicated to recovering “the activist, political and social commitments of many survivors” (193–4). And it is not until p. 198

that she admits “The testimonies also evidence political differences . . . within the CDCs”. Montonera guerrillas’ analytical framing and training, for example, were quite different from social activists’ perspectives (Actis et al. 2001: 63). That these different trajectories might explain the often dramatic variations in the way women responded to the horrific CDC treatment is apparently for Sutton not noteworthy; they are only mentioned late in the book in reference to “current implications” for the women’s political participation (198).

The book evidences another problematic of gender literature: a tendency to refer to repression and “state terror” in generalities, referring here to “feminicide” (sic) in Guatemala as a case in point (20). Legacies of war with violent, gendered practices are certainly notable in a number of countries, but detailing specificities of repression in the country under study is equally critical. In Argentina, we need to answer a number of critical questions. How and why the CDCs functioned differently under each branch during the Dirty War? How and why the captives were divided into “Unrecoverables”, “Semi-Recoverables” and “Recoverables” (*Recuperables*) as part of a “rehabilitation” policy? These are among many other missing details in Sutton’s book. We know, for example, that of the 651 CDCs, each branch of the armed forces focused on particular ideological groups: the Task Group of ESMA, the elite CDC of the anti-Peronist Navy with a specialization in capturing, torturing, rehabilitating or killing high-ranking Montoneros, with 6,000 killed and 50 to 100 “rehabilitated” and released, of whom 30 per cent were women; the anti-communist army Task Groups captured, tortured and mostly eliminated members of the Marxist PRT-ERP and trade unionists in CDCs on army bases. The methods each branch used tended to vary significantly (Robben 2005: 191, 250; Uriarte 1992: 119).

By avoiding such detail, Sutton is able to claim that the repression and torture “were geared toward changing detainees’ ideology and loyalties”, replacing them with normative roles of “motherhood, feminine dress, feminine interests” (88). Is she seriously suggesting that the primary purpose of “rehabilitation” policy at ESMA was to change detainees’ gender norms? Parsing the logic and reasoning at ESMA, it is apparent its intent was to ferociously exorcize militant ideology through torture in order to force the Montonera detainee to name comrades, to collaborate in fingering them on the street and, for some, to participate in interrogations and torture. As Uriarte relates,

If a “broken” guerrillero could serve to finger comrades, and is used to assist with interrogations under torture, then the triumph is almost complete; if he is willing to torture a detainee of his own group, then the victory of having reformed them to be loyal to their defeat would be complete. (1992: 118, emphasis added)

But where gender becomes particularly salient in this narrative is in regard to the “double aggressor” trope in which women are impugned through a double optic – not just as whores but “guerrilla whores”, not just as bitches but “Montonera bitches” (Lewin and Wornat 2014: 44). Interpreting such epithets as “underscor[ing] a perceived feminine deviance” (91), Sutton flattens the complexity of this sinister duality. What she does relay is how many of the women retain a confusion, shame and guilt in assessing the ambiguous relation intentionally created between themselves and the torturers. “Suddenly [after a torture session] they would sit there and tell you things about their lives . . . as if you were a friend” (79), and “The guard who had offered her something to eat [after a severe torture session] suddenly hit her on the head with the butt of a gun” (76). This tactic of ambiguity “blurred the boundaries” psychologically for the women “between repressors and captives” (78), between rape and consensual sex, between pseudo-dates and sexual slavery they endured in private apartments (79). Confusion and humiliation between what was forced and not forced collaboration on the women’s part – even when death threats against them and their families were used – reveals a moral and political repertoire to instil a vulnerability and guilt that has lasted for these women for decades.

When elements of a collaboration-qua-rehabilitation policy emerges in these testimonies, Sutton interprets the offer of family visits, eating out at restaurants, dressing in pretty clothes, wearing perfume, painting their nails, as a way to “convoke women to play” traditional gender roles (88). She asks in her conclusion, “Why should state officers bother with the bodily appearance of women captives?” beyond “repressors’ individual sexual desires . . . ensuring women knew their (subordinated) place in society”? (240). By placing this policy solely within individual, “masculinist” sexual desires and normative gender roles, Sutton succumbs to a reductivist gender analysis, ignoring the policy’s full intentions. A confession 30 years later by one of the ESMA officers establishes that there was an “explicit and general order to have sex with the [female] captives. . . . to submit the women to be overwhelmed, humiliated and destroyed as enemies” (Lewin and Wornat 2014: 378, emphasis added). Hence, the policy of “rehabilitation” entailed systematic degradation, rape, and slavery to sexually expose the women to psychological vulnerability. Yet, because “collaboration” carries an overtone of voluntary choice (Robben 2005: 248), this powerful tool led many of the women to *self-inflict*, to blame themselves for being collaborators in their defeat. Unfortunately, this extraordinary revelation is not included in Sutton’s book.

It is reasonable to ask whether this sinister policy directly tarred the women with the brush of active political and moral collaboration by having officers accompany

them (women who, up to this point, had been clandestinely disappeared in the CDCs) out into the public arena to fancy restaurants, crowded dance halls and family homes. From the military perspective, the women *Recuperables* had to be sexually humiliated and socially and morally discredited to their own guerrilla movement and by some relatives of the disappeared in the human rights movement, who referred to them as “traitor bitches” (78), to create internal divisions and ensure a paralysed opposition. I would note that Navy Chief Admiral Massera, who created ESMA, was so certain of his success in “breaking” Montoneros that he did not worry they would take up the cause upon their release (Robben 2005: 256). In the end, his decision boomeranged: in exile, they denounced the military, beginning in October 1979, and again in 2007 at the ESMA trial in which two women detainees courageously made specific charges against 14 naval officers for sexual violence and slavery (Lewin and Wornat 2014: 461, 480).

Sutton doesn’t answer the question as to how and why women of such varied political and social backgrounds responded to their ferocious torture and humiliation differently. In her desire to reveal the role of gender in these CDCs, she sweeps the social, political and ideological aspects aside, unintentionally robbing the women of their social and political complexity and agency, and reducing them to unidimensional, gendered actors. Nor does she provide specifics about the logics of Machiavellian state practices in the CDCs, other than as “masculinist” narratives to change detainees’ gender norms – ignoring evidence to the contrary. As a result, Sutton utterly diminishes the importance of understanding such practices with all their sinister tactical robustness.

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