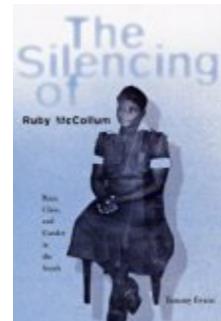


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tammy Evans. *The Silencing of Ruby McCollum: Race, Class, and Gender in the South*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xv + 173 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-2973-3.

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Published on H-SAWH (July, 2008)



Disquiet

Silence is golden, the adage goes. But the silences that pervaded the segregated South were more valuable by far than any precious metal. In the Jim Crow South, it was silences that first constructed and then protected the central myths of white supremacy, those intertwined fictions of natural race hierarchy and endangered white womanhood that formed the shaky foundation for an entire “way of life.” In a creative and convincing new book, Tammy Evans examines the rhetorical power of southern silences in the production of public memory. Evans tells the story of Ruby McCollum, an African American housewife in the segregated small town of Live Oak, Florida, who on August 3, 1952, drove with her two young children to the local office of prominent white physician and politician Doctor C. LeRoy Adams and gunned him down. The starkness of the crime was matched only by the evasiveness that characterized its aftermath, and it is this prevarication—this collective dissembling on the part of Live Oak folk, white and black—that is the true subject of the book.

Notes and letters written by McCollum allege years of mental and physical abuse at the hands of Adams (including the claim that she was pregnant with his child at the time of the shooting and had previously given birth to another of his children). And, according to McCollum, Adams was involved in her husband Sam’s illegal gambling operation, a charge substantiated by an employee who more than once witnessed the doctor accepting large deliveries of cash in examination rooms. The charismatic, well-loved doctor had a sinister side, too; cruelty and a

sharp lust for power were known to reside just below the sympathetic surface.

Yet, faced with such an audacious murder—a well-known and well-liked white professional “gentleman” shot in cold blood on a Sunday morning in the heart of downtown by a black female patient with whom he was rumored to be sexually entangled—the white citizenry of Live Oak quickly closed ranks. They promptly produced a coherent story about Adams and his death, one that was suitable for public consumption and that omitted any troubling complexities associated with him. The narrative that emerged was clear and unyielding: Adams, revered by black and white alike for his generosity and friendly nature, was murdered by McCollum (a crime to which she readily confessed) over a dispute over a medical bill.

The legal response was similarly swift and suppressive. After being whisked away to a state prison fifty miles distant under armed guard, McCollum was found guilty of murder in the first degree in a speedy trial and then sentenced to death by electrocution. The trial was highly scripted and marked by silences, especially the repeated refusal of the court to admit key testimony—McCollum’s biracial child and stories of Adams’s previous abuse—into evidence. In the end, McCollum was more or less rendered permanently mute; declared insane two years after the trial, she spent her remaining years in the state mental institution.

The story of McCollum was sensational at the time

and continues to intrigue, if for different reasons. The murder and trial received extensive contemporary coverage in newspapers and magazines—Zora Neale Hurston showed up to cover the trial for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, only to find Live Oak “a smothering blanket of silence” (p. 6). The case also attracted the attention of William Bradford Huie, whose 1956 account *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwannee Jail* would become a bestseller. The sheer presence of Hurston and Huie in the text will attract a certain segment of scholars, but Evans is interested in them only insofar as they illuminate her central concern: “the role of acts of silence in the preservation of a specific public memory in Live Oak and the South at large” (p. xxi). Evans uses the story of McCollum to explore a much larger one, “a longtime southern mythology dominated by acts of silence and often enforced by fear” (p. 3).

Evans argues that silence functions as a transformative speech act in the South, “the catalyst by which southern myths over time come to be accepted as ‘facts’ and, more important, why acts of violence committed in the name of protecting these myths often go unpunished” (pp. 34-35). The South itself, writes Evans, is textual in nature, the product of discourse laced through with silence. Silence, writes Evans, “constructed southern loveliness ... [and] silence worked to prevent exposure of the ugly underside of southern loveliness” (p. xxv). And, so when the actions of one black woman threatened to expose the myths of white supremacy as fiction, the townspeople of Live Oak promptly went mute, training unwanted media attention on the supposedly contentious issue of a medical bill. Entertaining the notion that Adams, a white man, might be imperfect was dangerous—equivalent to admitting the flawed logic of white male supremacy and the many structures of privilege it supported.

“Acts of silence are not accidental or arbitrary; they are carefully taught,” writes Evans, echoing Lillian Smith’s contention that ideological formations go undetected in the South, because they are taught in childhood and because white southerners “learn by necessity to reconcile an existence dominated by contradiction” (p. 31). Evans should know. A daughter of Live Oak, she, with this book, attempts to be “what Adrienne Rich describes as ‘consciously historical—that is, a person who tries for memory and connectedness against amnesia and nostalgia’” (p. xxxii). Evans recalls her own adolescent education in the silence required by white womanhood, when to step out of “a complex tapestry of polite conversation tightly woven about topics of church, home, and chil-

dren ... to speak of other less pleasant things“ was to risk “jeopardizing the validity of an entire community’s performance“ (pp. xxvii, 27).

The same white male-imposed codes of silence that simultaneously disciplined and privileged white women, writes Evans, negated the stories of African American southerners and placed in the foreground regional myths that advantaged persons already in positions of power. Drawing on the work of Patricia Yaeger, Anne Goodwyn Jones, and Susan Tucker, Evans considers the ideological work of a “complex system of surveillance” in place in Live Oak and the larger South, one heavily invested in the perpetuation of existing power relations (p. 35). Using the tragic case of McCollum as illustration, Evans successfully magnifies and amplifies the southern silences that are “always there, yet impervious to close inspection” (p. 5).

The field of memory studies has flourished in the past decade, successfully cutting across disciplines, time periods, and geographies in a way claimed by many proponents of interdisciplinarity but accomplished by few. This work proliferates with nuanced analyses of the constructions, performances, utterances, programs, and institutions designed to dictate or at least influence public memory.[1] But Evans takes a new tack. Listening to the silences and looking for the ellipses, Evans reveals the powerful memory work accomplished by southerners’ reticence or refusal to speak—by their reluctance to broach those volatile, off-limits subjects understood to be simply not discussed. In *The Silencing of Ruby McCollum*, Evans demonstrates the rhetorical value of muteness and the scholarly value of looking at public memory as a product not only of stuff but also of absence. Evans shouts at and outs silence for the potent speech act it is. Memory studies scholars would do well to listen up, as this innovative argument offers new possibilities for the field.

Note

[1]. An inclusive bibliography of the field is not feasible here, but examples of this varied scholarship include David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memo-*

rial (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, *ReMembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Edward Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004); Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); and Jim Weeks, *Gettysburg: Memory, Market, and an American Shrine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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