

Bruce Grant. 2009. *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* (in the book series “Culture and Society After Socialism”). Cornell University Press.  
reviewed by Kevin Tuite (Université de Montréal) for *Comparative Studies in Society and History*

In this insightful and useful new book, the anthropologist Bruce Grant, author of the highly-regarded *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas* (1995), documents the emergence and transformations of a master trope he calls “the gift of empire” in Russian literature and discourse, as the Tsarist empire expanded its borders southward into the Caucasus region in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In its more direct manifestation — still commonly encountered in the reproachful remarks of Russians concerning the post-Soviet Caucasus — the colonization of Circassia, Chechnya, Georgia and the rest of the region is justified as a *mission civilisatrice* which cost the Russians more than they received in return. According to this “logic of sovereign rule”, to use Grant’s terminology, the peoples of the Caucasus should feel gratitude, rather than resentment, toward the colonizers who brought them schools, roads, clinics, liberation from backward traditions (to say nothing of the 70% of North Caucasian regional budgets currently funded by the Russian federal government). One of the most effective vehicles for popularizing the concept of the gift of empire is the motif of the “Prisoner of the Caucasus”, this being the title of a poem composed in 1822 by Aleksandr Pushkin, as the Russian military incursion into the Caucasus went into full swing. Literary portrayals of a man (with whom the author and presumed readers identify) taken captive in an exotic locale, then released through the love of a local woman, go back to Antiquity, but it is in Tsarist, Soviet and even post-Soviet Russia that a homegrown variant of the Pocahontas tale achieved its greatest and most enduring popularity. Behind their flattering portrayals of the colonizer’s superiority and desirability, Grant detects within these narratives a “sleight of power”, consisting in a series of inversions masking the true asymmetries of the Russian-Caucasian encounter. The analysis has much to commend it: Grant demonstrates a sophisticated familiarity with Russian literature, Soviet popular culture and Caucasian history, and his tracing of the “gift of empire” concept from Pushkin’s time to the present provides valuable insight into the peculiarly intense attachment Russians feel to the Caucasus. (Incidentally, I would recommend *The Captive and the Gift* as background reading to anyone seeking to understand Russian perspectives on last year’s war in South Ossetia).

In portrayals of captives in the Caucasus written from the colonizers’ point of view, as Grant notes, the indigenes are mostly silent. Grant therefore provides space for selected individuals from the other side to give their perspectives on the “gift of empire” — among others, an Azeri film director and the Abkhaz writer Fazil Iskander. One promising avenue of inquiry for extending this work, in my view, would be to take a closer look at how representations of encounters akin to that of the Prisoner of the Caucasus are deployed in local-language literatures and popular cultures. Georgian literature and cinema, for example, yield not only variants told from the “prisoner’s” point of view (he being a Russified city-dweller, she a native of the remote valleys of the Northeast Georgian highlands), but also from the woman’s perspective (Tuite 2007). Nana Djordjadze’s glasnost-era film *Robinsonade, or my English Grandfather* (1987) features an Englishman who is held captive, in a sense, by a Communist agitator after the Soviet invasion of Georgia in 1921. He is released at the behest of the agitator’s sister, who has fallen in love with him, but in the end it is he, not she, who dies. What is more, she is pregnant, and, as the title implies, her grandchild narrates their story many years later. In the plot of *Robinsonade*, as well as its post-Soviet quasi-remake *Chef in Love* (1996), Pushkin’s “sovereign logic” has been problematized and inverted: Rather than being one of the conquerors, Djordjadze’s foreigner is among their victims, and his union with the local woman bears fruit, in the form of culturally Georgian offspring. In works such as these the bearer of the gift of empire undergoes a contrastive and doubtless deeply ironic refiguration.

Tuite, K. 2007. Ethnographie et fiction en Géorgie. *Célébrer une vie : actes du colloque en honneur de Jean-Claude Muller*, Kiven Strohm et Guy Lanoue, dir. Montréal: Département d'anthropologie, Université de Montréal, p 161-9.