

The Eradication of American proto-feminism: The re-conceptualizing of gender in the Indian Captivity Narrative

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Clear-cut gender roles as depicted in the early “Indian Captivity Narratives,” a genre that represented “arguably the first American literary form dominated by women’s experiences as captives, story-tellers, writers, and readers,” could be seen as literary precursors to Richard White’s “Middle Ground” theory.¹ Although White is not primarily concerned with the role of women on North American frontiers, his philosophy affords Native Americans – a group traditionally perceived as comparably disenfranchised – as playing a far more active role in their economic, environmental and social dealings with European settlers than historians had usually permitted before the 1970s. Although evidence of the Middle Ground is less apparent in the more confrontational “frontiersman” accounts of the nineteenth century, the formative captivity narratives penned by female authors – the “prototype of popular American writing, dominating publication during the last years of the seventeenth century and serving as essential source for much later American fiction” contain elements that serve as definite antecedents of White’s model.²

The premise of many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century captivity narratives echoes White’s central thesis of extensive interracial dialogue and exchange on American frontiers. The basic form of the Indian Captivity Narrative remains relatively constant, retaining “as its central premise the disruption of ... identity; through a violent separation from family, friends, and community, captives must come to terms with their identity in opposition to the Native community that has taken them.”³ Although such texts are disparate in theme and content, a recurring principle within many of them is that of the confined woman learning to endure hardship and develop practical skills, which exist outside the realm of traditional women’s roles in American society, where “the functional opportunities open to women were usually too limited to allow them to make the transition in attitudes necessary to insure high status performance in the newly emerging nation.”⁴

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In return, these women “assist” their captors via assuming domestic responsibilities, physical labour and attempt to impart Christian values upon them. In certain, but rarer, cases, interracial sexual unions are recorded. Although gender clearly distinguishes male and female encounters, they are habitually representative of the colonial experience, irrespective of the sex of the individual detainee. The captivity narrative has remained, in all its guises, “a major vehicle for reflecting upon the meaning of the European occupation of the captured space of the New World as well as upon the ways in which humans are captured by the space they inhabit; perhaps the most enduring literary record of native-white interaction.”⁵ Captivities were, according to historian Richard Slotkin, the “archetype of the American experience,” as the situation for captives – irrespective of age, race, class or gender – were presented with “an exaggerated and emotionally heightened illustration of the moral and psychological situation of the community ... Their ties with their families, with civilization itself, had been forsaken for the sake of their God’s will.”⁶

Nevertheless, the genre was initially shaped and formatively focused solely on the experiences of women. The history of the captivity narrative, and of American women’s literature must surely begin with “The Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary White Rowlandson,” a phenomenally successful and enduringly popular 1682 account of the capture and subsequent three-month imprisonment of a Massachusetts minister’s wife by the Algonquian tribe during King Phillips’ War of 1675. It is generally considered the genre archetype, although subsequent attempts to replicate its success would undergo dramatic thematic adjustments. Rowlandson’s book was “an immediate best-seller and was reissued in at least fifteen editions before the Revolution. It stimulated the publication of dozens, perhaps hundreds of other stories of captivity, most with far less religion and a great deal more gore.”⁷

This groundbreaking publication “initiated and became the prototype for innumerable subsequent stories of the white woman captured by Indians, a figure that has been continually reinvoked throughout American frontier literature.”⁸ Such features include an unrelenting piety infusing the text, a maternal protectiveness of children and a fear of “Indian Savagery” but, crucially, not one that extends to any sexual threat. Indeed, the sexual behaviour of Native Americans towards white female captives is perhaps the most contentious and divisive “gendered aspect” within captivity narratives. The “narrative record shows two dominant and differing responses to whether or not Indians raped captured women... overt or covert appeals to white women’s vulnerability and Indian men’s alleged sexual prowess (often made by male writers or captives) and

decisive claims that rape was virtually nonexistent in Native American culture (often made by women writers or captives).”⁹

Rowlandson may have not have been mistreated by her captors, but she does speak disparagingly of Native social customs and practices, claiming they exerted a “tyrannical power” and describing their food as “filthy trash,” and her forced living conditions as animalistic.¹⁰ She does, however, express a grudging admiration for the Algonquians’ pragmatism and industriousness. Rowlandson had expressed early concern over having been separated from her husband as it inevitably made her far more vulnerable, but this is only one fleeting reference to susceptibility due to her female status; she is more defined by motherhood and there is no explicit or even implied sexual threat. She remains adamant at her story’s conclusion that despite her captors’ supposed Godlessness “not one of them ever offered the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action.”¹¹

Such re-assurances are commonplace in female accounts of captivity, as if to allay male fears over threats to their women’s unsullied virtue. Rowlandson’s largely desexualised adventures give credence to Slotkin’s theory that captivity narratives transcend the gender of the author, as they develop “into a lived allegory of salvation, not just for an individual but for an entire people.”¹²

Prominent male clergy were more responsible for perpetuating fears of a largely unfounded risk to white women held in Native captivity, usually in order to augment their own position. A modern reading of Rowlandson cannot help but highlight an assertive, confident voice, undoubtedly a threatening influence to patriarchal early American society: according to Nancy Woloch, Rowlandson was “an exemplar of the frontier women as a nurturing wife, and mother, a pragmatic, shrewd and adaptive businesswoman with cross-culturally marketable skills, and a heroic survivor.”¹³ A modern reading of Rowlandson undoubtedly does much to subvert the established stereotypes of female Puritan behaviour.

Yet Rowlandson’s independent female voice would become a historical anomaly: it did not set a precedent for subsequent women authors, whose captivity narratives were “written or ‘improved’ by prominent clergymen” and whose revisions “tended to subordinate the particulars of the experience to totalizing interpretation, presenting captivity less as a personal spiritual trial than as a divine rebuke to an unregenerate society.”¹⁴

Increase Mather had provided the preface for Rowlandson’s narratives in addition to providing credibility references in a variety of late 17th century

“providence tales.” He even re-wrote Rowlandson’s experiences from the perspective of her husband Joseph, in which “the repletion of the word ‘his’ structures the entire passage (detailing the original Indian raid), making ownership and entitlement the primary relationship to all that is gone ... captivity, for the Puritan writers is a tragedy to those who are left behind, not to those who are captured.” In other words: the tragedy of the male. The consequence of this outlook clearly manifests itself in later captivity narratives. One particularly pertinent example is “An Authentic Narrative of the Seminole War; and of the Miraculous Escape of Mrs. Mary Godfrey, and Her Four Female Children,” which details a Seminole attack in Florida and was published by Daniel F. Blanchard in 1836. The account relates a “dreadful massacre” in which “many widows and orphans were made”: again, passively defining women in relation to their husband – just as Cotton Mather had attempted to do two centuries previously.¹⁵ Mary Godfrey’s account emphasises the tribe’s willingness to slaughter innocent girls and women, as if to stress the Seminoles’ indiscriminate brutality. Unlike previous narratives, merely having children has by this point become an obstacle to survival – Godfrey is said to be “impeded in her flight by the burden of her infant.”¹⁶ These subtle erosions of female agency can be traced back to these seventeenth-century modifications.

Increase Mather’s son, the famed author and rector Cotton Mather, recorded a diary entry in November 1696 which makes thinly-veiled reference to an apparently prurient desire to acknowledge sexual abuse perpetrated on white women by Native Americans, suggesting “there was no better means to promote the general Repentance” and to “give Testimony to the Justice and Goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ” than to make public the “terrible and barbarous Things undergone by some of our English Captives in the Hands of the Eastern Indians.”¹⁷

The attitudes of prominent males in Puritan society go a long way in explaining Rowlandson’s commercial and critical success; the reasons for “bringing Rowlandson’s story to a public readership are plain: ostensibly intending to create an approved place from which Rowlandson can speak of her experience in this text ... they in fact mean to marshal her text into the service of Puritan theocracy, belief in gender and racial hierarchies, and providential sanction for English colonialism.”¹⁸ We can also see the foundations of later male captivity narratives in the manipulation of such authors as Rowlandson by Mather and others. It is only when the central voice of the author is male, as occurs in “the second half of the eighteenth century,” that “narrative explorations of white-Indian sexual relationships were more explicit and more central to the

plot in many texts.”¹⁹ Yet despite such coercion to the contrary, female captivity narratives over the years tend to resolutely debunk the white male fascination with desecrated white female virtue.

Although Rowlandson may have provided the groundwork for other female essayists, the contradictory treatment she provides of her experiences serves to draw attention to the fact that there was not one distinct “type” of women who featured in captivity narratives. Indeed, superficially speaking, the only real unifying element in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century captivity narratives is their lack of uniformity; as “whether white women suffered their captivities patiently, resisted or escaped capture, or remained with the Indians,” the “strength and determination” these women exhibit remains “the only ‘consistency’ these narratives demonstrate.”²⁰ However, it is clear that gender *is* a vital component of such accounts, and that their female protagonists are defined by their resilience, adaptability or weakness in an expressly female framework.

A central feature of Rowlandson’s text is her status as a “nurturing mother and protector of her children.”²¹ This is replicated in a number of the more prominent captivity narratives that followed in the wake of Rowlandson, perhaps most directly in Elizabeth Hanson’s “God’s Mercy Surmounting Man’s Cruelty, Exemplified in the Captivity and Redemption of Elizabeth Hanson” (1728). Like Rowlandson, the author defines herself in terms of strong maternal instincts and faith in the redemptive powers of Christianity. She also positions herself as an anxious and attentive parent, remarking that following her abduction from her New Hampshire farm home in 1724 that her “heart was very full of Trouble, yet on my Child’s Account, I was glad that she has so good an Inclination [of a biblical passage] which yet further manifested in longing for a Bible.”²² Hanson echoes Rowlandson’s criticisms of her captors, criticizing them for an “excess of Gluttony and Drunkenness” but is careful not to accuse them of any impropriety, even later going on to explicitly praise “the Indians being very civil towards their captive Women, not offering any Incivility by any indecent Carriage.”²³

One of the most popular captivity narratives of the first part of the nineteenth century was *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (1824), which told the story of the eponymous heroine who survived a Seneca raid on her family’s Pennsylvania farm, and subsequently lived with the tribe. Jemison initially casts her assailants as barbaric and sadistic invaders, but subsequently describes an almost immediate bond of female kinship with the village squaws after being given the Seneca name “Dickewamis,” commenting that she “was made welcome amongst them as a sister.”²⁴ This fickleness shows itself once

more soon afterwards, when Jemison recounts her arranged marriage to a tribesman named Sheninjee, and the child she has by him. At first she is repelled by the very notion of the union, but readily acknowledges that his “good nature, generosity, tenderness and friendship” provided the basis for a marriage that lasted “two or three years.” Jemison then went on to re-marry another native man and had another daughter.²⁵ This account may be “quite atypical in the strength and independence it afforded” Jemison, as well as unusually frank and matter-of-fact in its approach to white-Indian sexual relations, but it also retains many of the standard features of conventional captivity narratives, including its representation of Native Americans as bloodthirsty warriors.²⁶

The popularity of this form endured well into the nineteenth century, for instance in Fanny Kelly’s *My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, chronicling experiences at hands of Ogalalla Sioux in July 1864, and Sarah F. Wakefield’s *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees*, released the same year. The former is unusually long, and in addition to conventional religious angle, the book is more descriptive than previous entries to the canon, with a greater emphasis on mundane details. Wakefield’s tale also contains some surprisingly uncommon traits; her husband was a Doctor for the Upper Sioux tribe, but during the Dakota War of 1862, Wakefield and her children were taken captive. She accredits her endurance in large part to the retention of her conventionally maternal characteristics, as well as the support of a surrogate husband Chaska, a Christian Indian farmer, who protects, reassures and sustains Wakefield’s hopes. At one point, Wakefield even claims to be Chaska’s wife in order to avoid death: “I would have called myself the evil spirit’s wife if I thought by doing so I could save my life.”²⁷

Like her predecessors, Kelly upholds the lack of sexual danger present in her experiences, but the narrative has developed a more nineteenth-century view of self as “the desolate white woman in the power of revengeful savages.”²⁸ The traits she claims to most admire in Ogalallas – their patience, robustness, good health, industriousness and enterprising nature – are parallels of previous narratives. However, unlike her literary precursors Kelly’s perspective reflects a more cultivated conservative attitude to female decorum. She employs glowing language to praise the “discretion and propriety” the Ogalallas use in their romantic courtship, the “bashfulness” and “inherent modesty” of the “forest belles and dusky maidens.”²⁹ Tellingly, it is when permitted to conform to a standard nineteenth-century American women’s role whilst under the Ogalalla’s guard that Kelly claims to be, at least initially, most at ease, suggesting just how well-established gender roles were by this point and how distressing any deviation from such a conventional existence was likely to have been. Kelly continues the

tradition of the “many women writers of Indian tales [who] agreed that Indian and white cultures were incompatible, and they accepted – indeed welcomed – their role as representatives of white civilization.”³⁰ Likewise, Wakefield seems most ill at ease when forcibly ordered to alter her conventionally feminine appearance. “How humiliating it was to adopt such a [native] dress, even forced by such circumstances! ... Surely I did not look like a white woman.”³¹ Wakefield later reiterates this fear of being stripped of her white identity as one of her most troubling concerns.

After beginning a period of residency with a Native family in a role of domestic servitude, Kelly writes that she “became more happy and contented than I had ever been since my captivity began. My time was occupied in assisting the motherly old squaw in her sewing and other domestic work.”³² But it does not take long for Kelly’s dissatisfaction to expose itself. She goes on to highlight – and sympathise with – the “very rebellious” older squaws she observes when transferred to the Blackfeet tribe, who according to Kelly “often display ungovernable and violent temper,” which she sees as justifiable due to male dominance and the expectations of a female “life of servitude.”³³ But this brief period of resistance to recognised female mores is forgotten instantly upon being returned to her position as a traditional American wife and mother. Kelly expresses unreserved joy upon being re-united with husband and, upon his death from cholera in 1867, describes herself as becoming a “mourning, desolate widow,” once again helpless and inconsolable.³⁴ Wakefield concludes that after being liberated from the Sioux, she felt that “all the time I was with the Indians, the women seemed to be envious of me, saying that the Indians thought more of me than any other female.”³⁵

Kelly and Wakefield provide a tangible bridge between the resolute female autonomy recorded in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century captivity narratives, and the “Male Warrior” staple of nineteenth-century narratives and their descendents. Instead of focusing on women, this new brand of “frontier fiction featured American men, wilderness exploits, and encounters with Indians” and proved “extremely popular in almanacs, pamphlets and longer publications.”³⁶ Of course, captivity narratives are bound to change and reflect the American social landscape. They “are never objective or neutral accounts; they are always structured and informed in specific ways in order to give a shape and a meaning to the captivity.”³⁷ Whilst the basis for the central male character in captivity narratives can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century and accounts such as John Filson’s *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784), featuring a narrator who is naturally inquisitive and industrious,

it is not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when the “heroic, rugged frontiersman” stereotypes perpetuated subsequently in Filson’s *Daniel Boone* and Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* become embedded in the national psyche.³⁸

The narratives that are published after 1865 are reflective of a tumultuous time in terms of American gender history; the role of males in an increasingly industrialised and urbanised environment inevitably created a degree of insecurity; hence, a re-invoking of the frontier conquerors of yore. “Dime Novels,” inexpensively produced pulp fiction that became hugely popular in the post-Civil War era, retain the original concept of “Indian savagery” but have become fully re-gendered. Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) comprehensively “rejects the woman-centred structure” of erstwhile captivity narratives, “reclaiming the Indian story for white men”; it also “maintains that love in the Western sense is very much in a woman’s interest and insists that such love is only encountered in the civilization that has invented it.”³⁹ Fenimore Cooper’s “creation of heroines that often seem to be the very embodiment of the cult of domesticity: ... obedient, domestic, pure, pious,” was just one component of the “promulgation through early nineteenth-century novels, magazines, advice books, and sermons” of the “Cult of Domesticity,” a structure that returned women to their places as wives and child-bearers.⁴⁰

As courageous, intrepid warrior males have replaced susceptible, physically weak women, the brutality and graphic violence are hinted at by the female authors of the formative captivity narratives no longer remains just an undercurrent; it has openly, perhaps even cheerfully, become these texts’ central feature. Such literature unabashedly portrays women as “sexually vulnerable” and “physically helpless,” always “requir[ing] the protection and support of white men.”⁴¹

The post-war captivity narrative resurgence can be attributed to a number of factors. Developments in publishing technology ensured printing costs could be greatly decreased, and latter-day captivity narratives enjoyed the pulp boom which also included true crime and serialisations. The earlier, female-oriented captivity narratives were popular with a more mature and well-to-do readership. And a new breed of highly visible, much celebrated group of male “stalwart pioneers” such as Daniel Boone, who had survived captivity, and later, Kit Carson, possessor of a famously belligerent attitude in terms of his view on Native Americans, had risen to national prominence toward the end of the 1700s and early 1800s.⁴² Mary White Rowlandson and her followers “depended on the

protection of God to save souls, the main lines of protection move with the ... Boone traditions to dependence upon weapons, 'smarts,' and masculine prowess to save one's self and family."⁴³

Whilst "white women's capacity to sympathize with the unfortunate might have a pacifying effect on the vanquished Indians, male writers countered by insisting that Indian-white violence was inevitable."⁴⁴ This new breed of male-centric narrative "so full of gore and war that they were dubbed 'blood-and-thunders' became increasingly popular with a young, overwhelmingly male audience; in particular the 'most avid early readers were soldiers in the Union and Confederate armies...Blood-and-thunders were sent to the army in the field by cords, like unsawed firewood', one contemporary reported."⁴⁵

Although male heroes had undoubtedly now taken centre stage, the necessity of protecting their women from native intruders remained a predominant, explicit concern of these stories' male protagonists. The cover of the November 20 1901 edition of *Pluck and Luck: Complete Stories of Adventure*, for example, contains a text accompanying the story entitled "The Boy Rifle Rangers" along with a suitably graphic illustration and a dialogue excerpt: "Give it to the red fiends, lads! It's life or death for us now, and think of Bertha, and all the innocent women and children who are in peril!"⁴⁶

The male-centred narratives of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to undermine the resilient image that readers of captivity narratives had been offered by the groundbreaking female authors, re-enforcing early Puritanical stereotypes of women as helpless and weak, whilst simultaneously exaggerating the racial elements that captivity narratives written by women had traditionally play down "alleging that Indian brutality – above all the slaughtering of women and children – was compelling proof of inherent Indian viciousness."⁴⁷

Endnotes

¹ Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives* (London: Penguin, 1998), xi.

² Richard Ruland & Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1991), 27.

³ Hilary E. Wyss, *Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 13.

⁴ Mary Beth Norton & Ruth M. Alexander, *Major Problems in American Women's History* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and co. 1996), 83.

⁵ Gary L. Ebersole, *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Post-Modern Images of Indian Captivity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 3.

⁶ Robert V. Hine & John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ Rebecca Blevins Faery, *Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race & Sex in the Shaping of an American Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 25.

⁹ Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, xvi.

¹⁰ Mary White Rowlandson, *Captivity and Restoration: Project Gutenberg Etext*, www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext97/crmmr10.txt, p.26, p.12 (09.10.2006).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² Ruland & Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism*, 27.

¹³ Ebersole, *Captured By Texts*, 267.

¹⁴ Pauline Turner Strong, *Captive Selves, Captivating Others: The Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 103.

¹⁵ Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, 227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹⁷ James Levermier & Henning Cohen, *The Indians and Their Captives* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 35.

¹⁸ Faery, *Cartographies of Desire*, 43.

¹⁹ Ebersole, *Captured By Texts*, 167.

²⁰ Christopher Castiglia, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture- Crossing and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 39.

²¹ June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 42.

²² Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁶ Sacvan Bercovitch, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume 2: 1820- 1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 222.

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- ²⁷ Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, 289.
- ²⁸ Fanny Kelly, *My Captivity Among The Sioux Indians* (New York: American Experience Series Corinth Books, 1962), 53.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.
- ³⁰ Nina Baym, "How Men and Women Wrote Indian Stories," in *New Essays on The Last of the Mohicans*, ed. Daniel Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 68.
- ³¹ Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, 258.
- ³² Kelly, *My Captivity Among The Sioux Indians*, 169.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 196.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.
- ³⁵ Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, 310.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ³⁷ Ebersole, *Captured By Texts*, 9.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ³⁹ Baym, "How Men and Women Wrote Indian Stories," 73.
- ⁴⁰ Signe O. Wegener, *James Fenimore Cooper versus the Cult of Domesticity: Progressive Themes of Femininity and Family in the Novels* (London: McFarland & Co, 2005), 43.
- ⁴¹ Christopher Castiglia, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9.
- ⁴² John Selby, *The Conquest Of The American West*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003), 36.
- ⁴³ June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier*, 66.
- ⁴⁴ Baym, "How Men and Women Wrote Indian Stories," 68.
- ⁴⁵ Jill Lepore, "Westward Ho! Revisiting Kit Carson – The Man, The Myth, And The Dime-Novel Hero," *The New Yorker* (October 9 2006), 75.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁴⁷ Baym, "How Men and Women Wrote Indian Stories," 67.

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