

FEMALE CAPTIVE STORIES IN THE UNITED STATES FROM THE COLONIAL  
ERA TO PRESENT: A STUDY IN THE PERVASIVE ELEMENTS OF THE  
TRADITIONAL NARRATIVE

by

GAILYN F. WHITMAN

B.A., University of Central Florida, 1994

B.A., Oakland University, 2000

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History  
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2005

Approved by

Major Professor  
Sue Zschoche

# Report Documentation Page

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE <b>01 FEB 2006</b>		2. REPORT TYPE <b>N/A</b>		3. DATES COVERED <b>-</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Female Captive Stories In The United States From The Colonial Era To Present: A Study In The Pervasive Elements Of The Traditional Narrative</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Kansas State University</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release, distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <b>The original document contains color images.</b>					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>UU</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>107</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## ABSTRACT

American culture is filled with a great many traditions. One way that its citizens share those traditions is through storytelling. The American war story has been being told since the Revolutionary War. It most often depicts its warriors fighting against incredible odds, only to emerge victorious. The female captivity narrative is one subset of the American war story tradition. The first females to be taken captive during warfare were the women of the colonial period throughout the various Indian wars. The first of these stories to be published was the narrative of Mary Rowlandson, a mother of three captured along with her children. Rowlandson remained a captive for several months before finally being released.

The captivity narrative became so popular that it has been repeated many times over in popular fiction and today's television and movie productions. An examination of such narratives, drawn from the entire chronology of American history, from the colonial period to the present, reveals that such stories are remarkably similar. Indeed, one could claim that captivity narratives are fundamentally the same story, one narrative varied only by details of the historical period and the identity of the captors. The issue of captivity concerning today's American female soldiers brings about another question. That is, are women warriors now incorporated into American war stories, or are they placed into a revised female captivity narrative? The female prisoner of war stories appear to fit the latter narrative.

This study will argue that this common narrative has revolved around three recurrent and basic elements that together constitute the American female captivity

narrative repeated continuously for three and a half centuries. The first common element is the captive is usually a white female of European descent. The captive's "whiteness" is punctuated by the fact her captor is a person of color; American Indians, Japanese soldiers, and Iraqi guards. The second element portrays the captive as both hero and victim, creating a conflict in expected behaviors of American women based on cultural norms. The final element focuses on the captives and American cultural perceptions of the "other;" the stories are often used as a means of propaganda which promotes the ideology of "good versus evil, Christianity versus non-Christianity, or America versus the "other." American women's continued exposure to war has made them susceptible to capture and the continuation of the narrative in American culture.

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## Introduction

The people of the United States of America tell many stories that are unique to American culture and America's understanding of itself. Each year the Thanksgiving Day holiday celebrates the helpful relationship that developed between Pilgrims and Indians during the very first year of English settlement in the new world. Books and movies glorify the heroics of the first manned lunar landing, and in bar rooms and living rooms across the country, sports fans will argue about which "World Series" was the greatest one ever played.

Even war stories, a staple narrative of virtually every society, have a unique national cast when told by Americans. As Tom Engelhardt has noted in *The End of Victory Culture*, American war stories tend to follow a predictable plot line. A small band of Americans, usually with a mixed class and cultural heritage, are set upon by a much larger band of savage warriors who use dishonorable tactics: the ambush, the surprise attack. In these stories, the end is a foregone conclusion: though facing desperate odds, the noble Americans, bound together by a love of liberty, prevail in the end.<sup>1</sup> From *The Last of the Mohicans* to the legend of Custer's last stand to the narratives of Pearl Harbor and now 9/11, the narrative has had enormous staying power.

A subplot of American war stories has frequently been the female captivity narrative, appearing first in the colonial period in the context of Indian wars. The first Indian captivity narrative was published by Mary Rowlandson in 1682 and recounted her captivity experience during Metacom's War in 1675 and 1676. Rowlandson's narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*. (Amherst, Mass; University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 9-14.

and others like it quickly became a tradition in the United States; dozens were printed during the colonial era and many more throughout the Indian wars of the late 1800s. The captivity narrative was so popular that the literary world adopted it as a unique genre and books by authors such as James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne used captivity stories as portions of their plots.

Today movies and romance novels still use captivity narratives to lure viewers to the theater or women to their favorite reading chair. An examination of such narratives, drawn from the entire chronology of American history, from the colonial period to the present, reveals that such stories are remarkably similar. Indeed, one could claim that captivity narratives are fundamentally the same story, varied only by details of the historical period and the identity of the captors. This study will argue that this common narrative has revolved around three recurrent and basic elements that together constitute the American female captivity narrative repeated for three and a half centuries. First, the traditional captivity narrative requires that the captive be a female of European descent and as a corollary, that her captor be a male of color. Initially, the captor was an American Indian, but in more recent renditions, the role of “Indian” has been played by Japanese soldiers and Iraqi guards; Indeed, any male of color will suffice.

The gender and racial differential between captive and captor are central to the narrative’s power. There are several underlying factors that make white womanhood a requirement. Presumed to be a non-combatant, the captive woman is, by definition, innocent of any aggression that would justify her capture. Moreover, as a woman, her vulnerability to outrages committed against her is all too obvious. Finally, her “whiteness” underscores both her innocence and her vulnerability; her presence at the



center of the narrative insures that she alone may claim moral superiority in the contest. The very first American female captivity narrative by Mary Rowlandson quickly became a measuring stick by which New Englanders measured the racial and cultural distance between themselves and the Indians.

In addition, the centrality of white womanhood, her innocence and vulnerability, lent itself to metaphorical interpretation. In such stories, the white female was easily understood as representing the community or the nation as a whole. Following the first publication of the Rowlandson narrative, Puritan minister appropriated her story to convey the vulnerability of New England society and its dependence upon divine intervention to save it. Later, in a more secular society, images of white women were commonly used to represent the new nation in the form of "Columbia" or "Liberty." In the captivity narrative, the plight of the captive is easily translated into the plight of the nation itself, threatened by savage enemies. As such, the captivity narrative could be easily appropriated to sanction violence against the enemy. The captive's/nation's vulnerability required rescue just as the captive's/nation's innocence demanded revenge.

Secondly, the central action in the female captivity narrative involves the behavior of the captive herself. She may behave as victim; she may behave heroically. The interpretation of her actions ultimately rests, however, not with her but with those who read or hear or view the narrative. That interpretation is inevitably complicated by both the cultural norms that define appropriate behavior for a woman in any given period, and by the fact that the captive is frequently seen as metaphorically representing the nation itself. Depending not upon the captive's actions, but rather upon the viewer's interpretation, the same behaviors may be seen as the actions of a hero, or, the actions of

a victim. The ultimate cultural judgment as to the captive's "worthiness" rests in the balance. At times, the behavior of a captive may be viewed as "unwomanly" or "unnatural," and implicitly unworthy of rescue or honor. At other times, a captive's behavior may be judged as too compliant and too submissive for an "American." In all cases, the dual nature of the captive's identity both reflects and triggers cultural ambivalence about women's agency.

Finally, the third element of the captivity brings to light the influences of the first two elements. The stark contrast in the narrative between the white captive and her savage captor reinforces American cultural perceptions of the "other." Historically, such narratives have been used to promote the duality of "good versus evil," Christianity versus non-Christianity, and the American way of life versus the way of others. The narratives have therefore frequently become a source of propaganda to promote racial stereotyping and the demonization of the "other." One may in fact argue that such narratives have persisted because they readily capture the American belief in the nation's innocence as well as the inherent justice of national actions, even violent ones.

This study will focus on the various elements of the female captivity narrative by examining such narratives from different periods in the nation's history. In Chapter One, we will examine recent historical literature analyzing various issues concerning the Indian captivity narrative as well as the impact of those narratives on American culture. Chapter Two examines the two narratives that may be said to be the prototype for all captivity narratives that followed: the seventeenth Century narratives of Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Dustan. Chapters Three and Four analyze nineteenth and twentieth century narrative respectively. The captivity narratives of Dr. Mary Walker

and Sarah Wakefield, both written in the 1860s, provide examples of contradictions to the captivity narrative. Chapter Four looks at the narratives of women in the second half of the twentieth century. Their stories are heavily influenced by their active participation in the military and their captivity by foreign enemies in distant lands. What these narratives, ranged across the entire chronology of American history, demonstrate above all is the endurance of the female captivity narrative.

## Chapter One

### Conceptions of the Captivity Narrative

The Newberry Library has compiled a list of almost two thousand captivity narratives published before 1880. The list includes only those narratives that were based upon the actual incidents of presented as factual accounts. A list that included the fictional accounts would have been much larger.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, historians and literary scholars have turned their attention to what these narratives have in common. In regard to the female captivity narrative in particular, they have produced a variety of analyses regarding the standard plot elements. Pauline Turner Strong in her *Captive Selves, Captivating Others* draws upon interdisciplinary conceptualizations, including ethnohistory, women's studies and American cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> Her study focuses upon the development of a selective tradition in captive narratives, and as such, offers readers a broad view of the narrative and its impact on the American social imagination.

Strong argues that the Indian captivity narrative represents the Anglo American struggle with identity. She posits that Americans faced with the encroaching wilderness struggled as a society to maintain their English way of life. Lured by the promises of economic opportunity New Englanders were enticed into the wilderness and closer to their Indian neighbors. The English viewed their neighbors as ungodly demons, savages, and beasts, a clear obstacle to English attempts to domesticate the wilderness.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary L. Ebersole, *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Postmodern Images of Indian Captivity*. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Pauline Turner Strong, *Captivating Selves, Captivating Others: The Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 3.

Simultaneously, however, survival in the wilderness required a reliance on Indian trade and the adoption of Indian skills, all of which blurred the lines between the two groups and threatened the colonists' sense of identity.<sup>4</sup> Strong argues that in such an environment, the clear distinctions between civilized and savage embedded in captivity narratives functioned to reinforce English identity.

According to Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, the captive narrative includes any story in which there is a captive and captor. As such, the elements of the captivity narrative appear in other stories told about women: "slave narrative, spiritual autobiography, the providence tale, the UFO abduction story, the convent captivity narrative and the sentimental novel."<sup>5</sup>

Derounian-Stodola argues that the Indian captivity narrative's development took place in three distinctive phases; "authentic religious accounts in the seventeenth century, propagandist and stylistically embellished texts in the eighteenth century and outright works of fiction in the late eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries."<sup>6</sup> Puritan ministers relied on providential tales to show God's intervention in the everyday lives of their flocks. Stories told through the eyes of ministers were central in developing the captivity narrative as the story of an experience that brought the captive closer to God.<sup>7</sup>

Christopher Castiglia's *Bound and Determined* argues that white female authors such as Susanna Rowson and Catharine Maria Sedgwick utilized historical accounts of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, editor, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. (New York: Penguin Group, 1998), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Castiglia, *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Culture-crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), xii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, xiii.

captivity as inspiration for their romance novels.<sup>8</sup> The novels themselves helped create the mythology of the “American wilderness,” a mythology that, Castiglia argues, allowed white women to confront in a literary sense their own “placement” in the new world.<sup>9</sup> He also suggests that novels of female captivity written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries promoted “expansionist racism” in “these tales of savage brutality committed by Native Americans against their benevolent white neighbors.”<sup>10</sup> In essence the captivity narrative was used to justify America’s imperial expansion as a story of the protective possession of wild lands on behalf of civilization.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, captivity novels along with true crime stories and serialized fictions in newspapers remained popular reading. Castiglia asks why the genre has continued into the supposedly more enlightened twenty-first century. One answer may be that such narratives reference conventional attitudes about race and gender. The standard captivity narrative denies humanity to the captor by stereotyping him as a savage who rapes and torments white women, thus perpetuating racial stereotyping. The narrative also denies agency to women, casting them as creatures ruled by impulse and bodily vulnerabilities rather than reason, thus depicting (white) women as passive pawns in the battle of men.<sup>11</sup> What then explains their popularity, particularly among women readers?

Part of Castiglia’s answer is that the stories themselves unite women by focusing on the problems they face in American society. The stereotypical captives of these

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 211.

<sup>9</sup> Castiglia, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 3.

narratives face gender discrimination, confinement in the home, enforced economic dependence, rape, and compulsory heterosexuality. Castiglia claims that these story elements, all highlighted in the texts, allow women to feel connected with each other as fellow captives. Lauren Berlant takes the argument of community based on an imagined captivity one step further in her, *Anatomy of National Fantasy*. Berlant argues that captivity narratives are symbolic of the nation. For Berlant, the borders of America are represented by the boundaries of white women's bodies.<sup>12</sup> "To the degree that the captive resists taking on the attributes of her captors, she represents the impermeable, defensible borders of the white Anglo nation."<sup>13</sup>

A major feature of captivity narratives is the portrayal of the white captive's resistance and her avoidance of identification with her captor. In Berlant's construction, resistance on the part of the captive represents the larger question of America's ability to maintain its national identity. Certainly, the subject of resistance threads its way through thousands of sermons, newspapers accounts, and pamphlets written about captivity experiences. Berlant sees it represented in national monuments as well. Consider the Statue of Liberty in which "Liberty" is represented as a woman who remains immobile and silent. This silence and immobility — her unvarying nature — is "fundamental to her activity as a positive site of national power and fantasy."<sup>14</sup>

Rebecca Blevins Faery looks further into the argument of white women captives as representations of American national identity. Her text, *Cartographies of Desire*,

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<sup>12</sup> Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

focuses on the settlement of the new world and how captivity of both whites and Indians shaped settlement. In particular, Faery compares the captive stories of Mary Rowlandson and Pocahontas and notes that Rowlandson, the white woman, remained the unwilling captive whereas Pocahontas is depicted as an Indian maiden who welcomed the English and willingly submitted to her captivity with them. Faery argues that these stories set the foundation for which American cultural history rests that is, the idea that American culture is inviolate and Indian culture permeable. This idea, she argues, became a persistent feature in the mapping of North America.<sup>15</sup> By mapping, Faery is referring to the continued westward expansion of the American frontier, a movement that followed known Indian routes and established Indian communities and in the process, violated or nullified both.

The dual narratives of white women's capture versus the capture of Indian women served to highlight cultural differences and justified conquest and the development of a nation founded on the idea of white supremacy.. Faery contends that Indian captivity stories were instrumental in construction the discourses of racial difference and identity and ultimately racial inequality that constitute central themes in American society then and now.<sup>16</sup>

The pervasive depiction of racial difference permeates the cultural discourse and suggests that "white women, their bodies and their sexuality, positioned as guardians of the boundaries of race, serve the territorial and political purposes of white men and their

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<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Blevins Faery, *Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race, and Sex, in the Shaping of an American Nation*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 10.



claim to dominance.”<sup>17</sup> Combined racism and sexism uphold one another, each making the other viable and stronger as a cultural rationale. Faery argues that captivity narratives were “quickly recognized as useful instruments in the process of evoking ‘race’ and asserting racial hierarchy.

*Cartographies of Desire* explores the stories of captive women as well as the “Indian Princess” arguing that the narratives endured because of the way in which race and gender are revealed in such narratives. Faery argues that the map of America was built on the desires of white men, both literally and figuratively: colonizers who desired both territory and Indian women at the same time they desired to protect *their* white women from the sexual desires of both African and Indian men. For Faery, the desire for land and the desire for the sexual control of women were thus central in the shaping of the nation.<sup>18</sup>

The work of Castiglia, Berlant and Faery illustrates the difficulties in separating the ideas of race, “the others,” and sexuality from the issue of captivity. From the very beginning of white settlement on North American soil, Anglo-Americans have struggled to maintain their dominance over Indians, and later, Africans. This notion of white male domination has become part of the American identity. The idea of white women being captured threatens that identity by challenging the ability of white American men to protect not only their women but the nation itself. The work of these three authors highlights the selective tradition established by the captivity narrative and suggests it functions as a justification for domination.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 12.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Colonial Indian Captivity Narratives**

In *Captured by Texts*, Gary Ebersole argues that, no matter how factual such accounts are, captivity narratives are neither neutral nor objective. Instead, he says, such narratives are designed to attach meaning to the captivity.

The narratives contained in this study convey a consistent “meaning” by the use of formulaic plot devices. Moreover, by examining such stories over a long period, it can be seen that more recent stories of female prisoners of war, though quite different in detail, conform to the structure of the earliest Indian captivity narratives. In doing so, the more recent narratives convey the same meanings as early tales. Indeed this study argues that more recent narratives are easily understood precisely because they fulfill the pervasive formula of plot and resolution. Utterly familiar to American readers, the captivity narratives told over the course of American history become “comforting” because they pose the same questions and provide the same answers over and over again.

As noted in the Introduction, the formula for female captivity narratives includes three elements. The first element involves the cast of characters, starting with the women themselves. Although there have been captive narratives featuring Indian women and slave narratives that feature African-American women, the most common and enduring cultural narrative focuses on the captivity of white women held by men of color, stressing the obvious racial contrast between captive and captor. According to Jone Johnson Lewis, the early Indian captivity stories reinforced stereotypes of white womanhood and their captivity narratives “are a part of the cultures definition of what a ‘proper woman’

should be and do.”<sup>19</sup> During captivity women are not treated as they “should” be. Their refined sensibilities are often challenged by having to witness the deaths of family members, and other violence. In these narratives, the conditions of captivity further defy the norm for white women: captives live in filth, they face forced sexual relations with captors, and they are unable to protect their children.<sup>20</sup>

The second element of the captivity narrative focuses on actions of the captive. Each one of the narratives portrays the captive as behaving as either a hero or a victim, and most often, as both. Survival alone makes the captive a hero, but the captivity itself makes these women victims. If the white woman is a necessary element in the captivity narrative, her role in the story can nonetheless vary: some women fight their captors, some do not. As such, captivity narratives tend to be ambiguous regarding women’s actions. Is the “good captive” the one who fights, or the one who resists?

In large part, the ambiguity regarding a captive’s behavior is triggered by the fact that , within the captivity narrative, the captive represents both white women and America itself. Should the white female captive be viewed through her gendered role, she can be expected to act within the cultural prescriptions regarding gender, prescriptions that have until quite recently stressed woman’s domesticity and passivity. Submission to her captors would be a mark of her femininity; it would also insure her victimization. Should the captive be culturally viewed as a representation of America as a whole, however, her actions should indicate a level of resistance to the enemy

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<sup>19</sup> Jone Johnson Lewis, “Women Captives and Indian Captivity Narratives: Stereotypes Reinforced and Challenged,” *Encyclopedia of Women’s History*, 1999-2000 [Encyclopedia on-line]; available from [http://womenshistory.about.com/library/ency/blwh\\_captivity\\_narratives.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/library/ency/blwh_captivity_narratives.htm)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

corresponding to American ideals of heroism. The narrative's conflict concerning victimization versus heroism is therefore seemingly inevitable.

The final element of the narrative formula draws upon the duality of the first two elements (white vs. dark; victimization versus heroism) to understand cultural perceptions of the "other" and by doing so, to render the narratives into a medium by which propaganda promoting the ideology of "good versus evil, Christianity versus non-Christianity, or America versus the "other," is delivered.

The idea of racial differences as structured through social and political practices in America began during the colonial period. English colonials were in constant contact with the "racialized other," and captivity stories made that racial difference more evident by using female bodies as the stories' primary tool. The presence or threat of sexually depraved acts in captivity stories linked racist ideas ("the non-white male as sexual brute") with sexist ideas ("pure womanhood cannot defend herself) and, in the process reinforced both.<sup>21</sup>

The Indian captivity narrative, which is unique to American literature, developed at the same time Americans were defining their understanding of racial differences. Rebecca Blevins Faery argues that "the historical coincidence was no accident; rather, captivity narratives were very quickly recognized as useful instruments in the process of evoking 'race' and asserting racial hierarchy."<sup>22</sup> Captivity narratives became a primary vehicle by which Anglo-Americans learned to "become white" and to create an inferior

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<sup>21</sup> Feary, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 12.

category by which Indians, Africans and “others” became “colored or dark.”<sup>23</sup>

Representation of white women held captive by the Indians and “others,” as told through the captives’ narratives this became a matter of “selective tradition.”

Raymond Williams defined the term “selective tradition” in his *Marxism and Literature*, as “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification.”<sup>24</sup> During the course of the colonial period dozens of captivity stories were published, many with the improvements of clergy who used these stories as a way to teach Puritan and Quaker societies how to conduct themselves spiritually in the new wilderness.

Following Williams’ idea of the pre-shaped present, images in literature, drama, art and today’s television illustrate or typify the notion of selective tradition. For example, the United States Capitol Building housed a statue by Horatio Greenough titled *The Rescue* in its east entrance from 1853 to 1958. *The Rescue*, a monument to American nationhood, depicts a European male in archaic dress rescuing a partially clothed white woman and her child from a nearly naked Indian. Pauline Strong argues that the statue illustrates “the opposition of race, gender, civility and rationality,” as “Greenough’s sculpture both depicts the vulnerability of European civilization in the American wilderness and legitimates the nation’s use of force against the savage others.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1977, 115, quoted in Pauline Turner Strong, *Captivating Selves, Captivating Others: The Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), 1999, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Strong, 5.

The Indians were not the only group that New Englanders defined by a selective tradition. Puritan women themselves helped to shape the notion of the “others” and at the same time holding a similar position to that of the Indian within their own culture. In a Puritan patriarchal society, both women and Indians were viewed as childlike and were considered dependent on the Puritan father figure. The Indians were expected to be dependent because of their “uncivilized” way of life and women dependence was based on their cyclic rhythms.<sup>26</sup> This “natural” versus cultural way of behavior led the Puritans to believe women were more susceptible to unacceptable and licentious behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Both Indians and women were expected to act within the dictates of society, both childlike and subservient to white men. One fear raised by captivity was that a sudden alliance would develop between the female captive and her Indian captor based on preconceived notions of similar behavior. This potential alliance became a problem for women in captivity and highlights another difficulty. Women in captivity were expected to deviate from their prescribed female role in order to resist their captors; in other words, a woman should reject passive subservience, as was required of her, and renounce any resemblance between herself and her captors.<sup>28</sup> The need to resist during captivity was essential to a woman’s redemption upon return to civilization. This same resistance, however, also made a captive woman suspect within her society because, through her resistance, she transgressed her prescribed female role.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Faery, 32.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

The contrast between the white captive and dark captor is highlighted in the early writing of Cotton Mather, who wrote, “How many women have been made prey to those brutish men, that are skilful to destroy? How many a fearful thing has been suffered by the fearful sex, from those men, that one would fear as devils rather than men?”<sup>30</sup> The female captive highlighted the vulnerability of Puritan society in New England, surrounded as it was by “brutal savages” who ravished white women and butchered their husbands and children. Mather also underscored the savage nature of the Indians in his depiction of Indian women who acted as captors alongside their men. Mather described them as “insolent” and pointed to their alleged cruelty to white female captives. The Indian squaw treated the captives, not with the loving authority applauded by Puritan society, but with cruelty, forcing their captives into an abject submission. In doing so, Mather further distanced Puritan society from Indian culture, positing that Indian women were not “true” women.

The American captivity narrative has been told for more than three hundred years, born in the 17<sup>th</sup> century New England wilderness. It has endured because it is familiar, entertaining in its foregone conclusion. But this narrative has also endured because it conveys a comfortable meaning — propaganda so seemingly obvious to many Americans that it is received only as the “truth.” From the first, captivity stories have been used to perpetuate stereotypes, first about Indians, and eventually, about any non-white culture. Edward W. Said argues that “one aspect of the electronic postmodern world is that there

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<sup>30</sup> Cotton Mather, 1699 as quoted in Pauline Turner Strong, *Captivating Selves, Captivating Others: The Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999,132.

has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient [Arabs] is viewed.”<sup>31</sup> Said further argues that standardization and cultural stereotyping by the West has intensified established nineteenth century academic demonology of the people of the Near East.<sup>32</sup> In America, this cultural stereotyping was first practiced on the American Indians during the colonial era.

What follows is a collection of stories that illustrate the long history of female captivity narratives. These narratives have been summarized from either the autobiographies or the authorized biographies of the captives. Though each story is unique, each draws upon the familiar narrative formula.

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<sup>31</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 26.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



**Mary Rowlandson, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682)<sup>33</sup>**

Mary Rowlandson's narrative was the first female Indian captivity narrative ever written in North America and remains the standard to which all other female captivity narratives should be compared. The text itself was published in 1682 several years after Rowlandson wrote her account. During the first year it was reprinted four times and sold hundreds of copies, an accomplishment that in today's literary world, would give it the status of a *New York Times* best seller.

Mary Rowlandson wrote her narrative in the year following her release from captivity. Her reasons for writing the narrative were personal, a way to struggle with the circumstances of her captivity. Rowlandson was possessed of what we now would call "survivor's guilt." She had decided to go willingly with the Indians rather than accept death as her sisters had done. Rowlandson went with her captors "in the name of God," which was consistent with what New England culture would have expected of her. As a woman, submission was her lot in life; she had submitted her will to her husband and to God.<sup>34</sup> Submission to the Indians was a more complex and gendered issue; English men were expected to resist. Those English male captives returned from captivity were often

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together, with the Faithfulness of his Promises Displayed Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. ed. Neal Salisbury. (Boston: Bedford, 1997), reprinted in Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. (New York: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>34</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Phillip's War and the Origins of American Identity*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 135.

judged for their capitulation, and in one instance, a male captive had been executed after his return.<sup>35</sup>

Mary Rowlandson had capitulated to her Indian captors, and was haunted by her choice to go willingly, a choice she forced herself to confront while writing her narrative. In that sense, Rowlandson's initially private account was a search for redemption.

Rowlandson's eventual choice to publish her narrative was not completely her own. She did so at the encouragement of family and friends, and in effect, it was a spiritual decision. Her account may be seen as a religious quest, an attempt to understand the meaning of her capture and release and its relevance to her relationship with God. Her mentor in the writing and publication is believed to be the eminent Puritan minister, Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather. Mather's probable influence on Rowlandson is underscored by the minister's own obsession about King Phillip's war. He wrote his own "true history" of the Indian wars of New England, and included the story of Mary Rowlandson. The war was a frequent topic in both the press and in literature as the colonists tried to come to terms with the violence and the meaning of their own role in the shaping of the new world. Finally, the religious nature of the narrative further amplified by the fact that its original printing included a sermon by Rowlandson's minister husband, indicating that the story affected him as much as his wife.

The Rowlandson narrative remains one of the most widely read tales of Indian captivity. The story has become the quintessential representation of the female captivity narrative, in effect, a prototype for all those that followed. It closely adheres to all three elements of the formulaic plot: white womanhood, heroism and victimization, and its use as propaganda by which to stereotype the "other."

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Mary Rowlandson's narrative begins in February 1675 during King Phillip's War (also known as Metacom's War.) She was at home with thirty-three other household members while her husband was away. Shots could be heard at nearby, and from the window, Rowlandson and her sister could see the homes of their neighbors burning. The women barricaded themselves and their children inside, dreading the moment when the "barbarians"<sup>36</sup> would come to break in and murder them.

The women and children trembled in fear awaiting their fate when, after only a few short moments, gunshots began to fly through the walls of Rowlandson's home. There was so much gun fire Rowlandson thought that it sounded like hail.<sup>37</sup> Three men were wounded and as the family looked out they could see the "savages"<sup>38</sup> coming closer with torches ready to set the house ablaze. The battle went on for what Rowlandson thought was about two hours when the Indians finally succeeded in setting the house on fire. The waiting was over, their fate now sealed.<sup>39</sup>

With the fire raging ever closer, Rowlandson grabbed her youngest daughter Sarah and headed for the door. Her sister also went, taking along one son. Rowlandson's sister and son were killed immediately by the hail of bullets and Rowlandson herself was shot in the side. The bullet had passed through her daughter Sarah, injuring both at the same time. Rowlandson could only watch the carnage as the Indians brutally took hatchets to the heads and bodies of the remaining members of the house.

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<sup>36</sup> Rowlandson, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Rowlandson, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Thus were we butchered by those merciless heathen, standing amazed, with the blood running down to our heels. My eldest sister being yet in the house, and seeing those woeful sights, the infidels hauling mothers one way, and children another, and some wallowing in their blood: and her elder son telling her that her son William was dead, and myself was wounded, she said, 'And Lord, let me die with them,' which was no sooner said, but she was struck with a bullet, and fell down dead over the threshold.<sup>40</sup>

When the attack was over, twenty-four survivors were taken captive.

Rowlandson was relieved to see that her two older children had survived, but they were quickly separated as each was taken by a different group of Indians and led away.

Rowlandson's group moved a little way off to a nearby hill where the Indians had gathered to feast on the plundered livestock of the town.

The following morning the war party split again and began to travel into the wilderness. Rowlandson walked a great distance, at times carrying her wounded Sarah, and sometimes following closely behind a horse that held her child. That night it began to snow and Rowlandson was forced to sit on the cold damp earth with her child on her lap. The group traveled for many days. Occasionally, Rowlandson was fortunate enough to be able to ride behind one of the Indians on his horse. She continued to carry Sarah for a few days when they arrived at an Indian town called Wenimesset, located north of Rowlandson's home in Lancaster. Sarah was ripe with fever and infection; she finally succumbed to her wounds and died shortly after stopping for the night. The Indians buried the body and forced Rowlandson to leave her dead child behind. Rowlandson's eldest daughter was also in the town, but she was unable to visit with her. A short while later her son, who was camped six miles from the town, came to visit. It would be the first of several brief visits with her son during her captivity.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 13.

Mary Rowlandson spent several days in the town while many of the Indians went off to fight in the nearby English town of Medfield. Upon their victorious return, Rowlandson was once again blessed with a small kindness. One of the Indians offered her a bible from his plunder. Rowlandson found great comfort in this and began to read immediately. She would rely often on the comforts of biblical verse to help her through her captivity.

Rowlandson was soon taken from the Indian town, once again separated from her oldest children. Her captors moved quickly through the forest with no rest or food. The English army was following them and haste was necessary. The group was finally able to make good their escape by crossing a river and burning their wigwams to fool the pursuers. The trick worked and Rowlandson was left with little hope of rescue.

Mary Rowlandson spent more than a year in captivity. She survived by begging for food, of which there was never enough, and by making clothing for the Indians in her group. Her constant companion and comfort was her bible, which she turned to often. Indian life was difficult at best. Rowlandson could not comprehend the minor cruelties of her captors. If she earned a bit of food, it was stolen from her. Her mistress treated her roughly and punished Rowlandson for begging, but would not feed her. But Rowlandson did survive and learned to work among the Indians, all the while praying for redemption.

As King Phillip's War was coming to an end, Indian victories became rarer and the English began to call for the redemption of the captives. Rowlandson learned of this when she was told to meet her Indian master at the town of Wachusett. The Sagamore council had received a letter asking for Rowlandson's release. Although starving and

barely able to continue through the forest, Rowlandson persevered. With only a small bit of boiled horse hoof broth, she managed to make the fourteen day journey to town and was greeted warmly by her master.

Mary Rowlandson prepared herself to be reunited with her husband. She was even so bold as to negotiate the ransom for her release. Letters were exchanged and within three weeks of her arrival in Wachusett, Rowlandson was reunited with her husband. Rowlandson's children were also released and the couple hurried to claim them. Rowlandson's husband died the year following her release. She remarried a man named Samuel Talcott and lived the remainder of her life in obscurity.

As the first such narrative, the account of Mary Rowlandson's captive experience can be seen as the prototype of the female captivity narrative. Her normal life involved taking care of three children and maintaining the family home. Her husband was often away from the home and Rowlandson was expected to take over, but on the day the Indians came, Rowlandson was powerless to stop them. She witnessed her sisters' murders and held her youngest daughter Sarah as she died several days into captivity.

The narrative tells a story not only of captivity, but of the relationships between the Indians and the New Englanders, and most importantly, when read metaphorically, the story defines the English themselves. Rowlandson's role as wife and mother on the English colonial frontier becomes the representation of all white women in the colonies and America as a whole. English society was a "bounded society."<sup>41</sup> Indian attacks quite literally violated the boundaries between what was English and what was not, and hence violated the English way of life itself. The capture of an English goodwife threatened all of colonial society by violating not only the bodies of English women but English culture

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 74.

as well. Rowlandson's narrative clearly depicts her efforts to maintain those boundaries. Although she learned to live, work, and survive among the Indians, in her heart she remained faithfully English. She expressed revulsion at all things Indian, describing the food as "filthy thrash" and the Indians themselves as "barbarians and savages." As for the ultimate boundary — her body — Rowlandson made it very clear that she had escaped; the Indians never raped her.

The importance of white womanhood as a key element of the captivity narrative becomes clearer when Rowlandson's behavior in captivity is examined more closely. First, there is Rowlandson's capitulation to capture, a choice that haunted her and would have doomed her redemption had she been male. Although English society was a bound society — bound by walls and fences, bound by cultural expectations, bound by class and servitude — the English thought of themselves as essentially free. For English males, freedom meant that one owned oneself; a true Englishman was therefore incapable of complete enslavement. Their bodies might be held captive, but never their minds. Indians could and were often taken as slaves; Indians could and did adopt English habits. Both possibilities "proved" Indian inferiority. Englishmen were not the slaves of Indians; Englishmen did not "become" Indians in their habits.

An English woman, however, was the weak link in maintaining the boundaries of Englishness. While English captive males were thought to be free mentally from a slave mentality, English women were expected to have no will of their own; indeed, they were expected to turn over their independent wills to the dominance of men and God. This gendered duality meant that the capture of an English woman particularly threatened English identity. Would the female captive submit to the will of the savage? Was it

possible even that she would willingly abandon her Englishness and embrace the company of savages? Through Rowlandson's capture, New England's boundaries were violated, its essence captured, and its endurance threatened by her allegedly weak will as a woman; through her redemption, however, society was also redeemed.

The question of survival in captivity and redemption in English society are at the heart of the Rowlandson narrative. The issue of whether or not Rowlandson's behavior made her a hero or a victim is largely predicated upon, not the fact of her survival, but on the nature of her survival, that is, is the particular tactics she chose to stay alive.

Rowlandson witnessed the deaths of her sisters and daughter. She also saw the slaughter of her neighbors and her town burned to the ground. Her own injury threatened her life and the constant struggle for food and shelter left her at the mercy of her captors. Yet Rowlandson's narrative recounts the actions of a woman who, though she capitulated to captivity, was never completely enslaved. Her resourcefulness, her patient endurance, and her humility before her God were the marks of her survival.

Rowlandson's main work among the Indians was knitting and sewing. Even though she was a slave in Quinnapan's wigwam, she successfully traded her skills for additional food. More ironically, Rowlandson was able to survive her captivity not only because of her skill, but because she understood the nature of servility.<sup>42</sup> Rowlandson was able to shift her role from that of mistress to maid in order to please her captors, at one point making her master a meal with the precious little food she had.

In short, Mary Rowlandson remained English, her identity unviolated. According to Laurel Ulrich, Rowlandson emerges from captivity "a courageous and ruddy heroine,

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<sup>42</sup> Ulrich, 227.



resourceful, feisty, more housewife than saint, a minister's wife who gave up her pipe-smoking in captivity but not her vivid speech."<sup>43</sup>

The third element of the female captivity narrative is its usefulness as propaganda to stereotype captors, highlighting their racial difference and their status as "others." The narratives have also been used as a means to teach lessons to readers about their own behavior and status in society.

The Indian captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson served two areas of propaganda. The first is the narrative's obvious use as an anti-Indian taunt. The second, religious leaders' appropriation of the stories to illustrate the waywardness of Puritan society. Prior to Metacom's war, Puritan ministers began to worry about their flocks. Ministers argued that Puritan society was becoming faithless and worldly. Desire for land and riches at the sake of Puritan beliefs was leading society down a path of spiritual degeneracy.<sup>44</sup>

Ministers such as Cotton Mather saw that frontier settlers were abandoning the religious order of Puritan life for the individualism they claimed was characteristic of Indian life.<sup>45</sup> One reason for this spiritual waywardness was disdain for the hierarchical relations that had been ordained by God: "the subordination of women to their husbands, children to their parents, servants to their masters and laity to the clergy."<sup>46</sup> The Indian captivity narrative was used by the clergy to illustrate the spiritual vulnerability of society. The clergy proclaimed the colonial Indian wars as battles against the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Strong, 118.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

“seductiveness of heathenism and Catholicism,” they applied the redemptive qualities of the narrative to the entire community rather than individual alone<sup>47</sup>.

Captivity could be seen as God’s displeasure at the corruption of society and a means to bring parishioners back into the fold. Cotton Mather was particularly interested in using the narratives to illustrate this societal backslide into depravity. Mary Rowlandson’s narrative referred constantly to the divine providence of God for the food she managed to beg or earn as well as the kindness of various Indians. For example, when she was given a bible after the battle at Medfield, Mary considered it and deliverance from God rather than a human act of charity by the Indian giving her the book.

Rowlandson’s narrative talked often of the cruelties of her mistress, and her struggles to survive in the Indian culture. She regarded any acts of kindness as the divine intervention of God. Others who told the Rowlandson story embellished the savage view of Indians so as to make them appear no better than animals. In one letter presumably by Nathaniel Saltonstall, and published in 1676, the Rowlandson capture of Mary and her two sisters was recounted.

One sister, who was pregnant was killed immediately while the other, also pregnant, was forced to into the woods. “As they were leading them away in the lamentable condition, one of the sisters being big with childe, going into the woods to be privately delivered, the Indians followed in a jeering Manner, they would help her, and be her midwives, and thereupon the barbarously ript up her body, and burnt the childe before her face, and then in a merciful cruelty, to put her out of her pain, knockt her o’th head.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>48</sup> Strong, 47.

This account is obviously a fabrication as it did not occur in the Rowlandson narrative, but it clearly illustrates how the narrative could be used to create a vivid image of the violation of colonial women and the savagery of the Indian other. This blatant use of savage imagery was used by the author to highlight the atrocities committed by the Indians during King Phillip's War. The Rowlandson narrative provided the vehicle by which English settlers could identify themselves while clearly viewing the Indians as racially different. In an era when the colonials were become less English and more like their nemesis the Indians, the Rowlandson narrative allowed readers a reassuring glimpse of one English woman's redemptive quest.

When focusing the Rowlandson narrative it is apparent that the elements of white womanhood, heroism and/or victimization, as well as the use of the narrative as racist propaganda are intertwined and essential to the story. Mary Rowlandson wrote her tale from her own need to come to terms with her captivity. Over the course of three centuries the narrative itself became the foundation for other stories of female captivity. The actors and settings are different in each narrative, but the elements remain the same. The narrative of Hannah Dustan holds many of the same characteristic of Rowlandson's story. Both take place during the colonial period and during the Indian wars. Both women survived their captivity and return to English society. The difference in the two stories becomes clear when they are examined in the context of how each has been judged over time.

**Hannah Dustan, *Magnalia Christa Americana, the Ecclesiastical History of New England* (1702)<sup>49</sup>**

The story of Hannah Dustan took place more than 25 years following the capture and redemption of Mary Rowlandson. The Dustan narrative was first written by Cotton Mather in a sermon in which he remarked on her heroic deeds of murdering her captors and escaping a life of servitude and abuse in Indian captivity. He would later publish the Dustan account in various texts including the *Humiliations Follow'd with Deliverances* in 1697 and the *Magnalia Christa Americana* in 1702.

Mather like his father, Increase, before him, was concerned about the waywardness of the Puritan settlers. Puritan settlements had moved further into the wilderness. Desire for new lands and economic opportunities had led many colonists to settle nearer the Indians and adopt many Indian practices. This separation from civilized society removed settlers from church influence and ministerial control.

Cotton Mather relied on the captivity narrative of Hannah Dustan and others like her to illustrate the waywardness of Puritan society. The Dustan tale, according to Mather, was one of heroism. In its telling, denounced Indian ways at the same time that he argued a commitment to more godly behavior. The Dustan narrative reached such a level of popularity that Dustan was eventually viewed as a legendary heroine amongst the settlers of New England.

During the 1830s, however, the Dustan narrative would fall out of favor as her “heroic” acts were increasingly seen as an abomination and an affront to “true” womanhood. Her story would continue to be told, but for very different reasons.

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<sup>49</sup> Cotton Mather. *Magnalia Christi Americana. : Or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England*. (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), reprinted in Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. (New York: Penguin, 1998), 58.

By the 1950s, the Hannah Dustan story emerged once again, this time appearing in popular publications including comic books. It was once again told as an heroic story and reflected perhaps the hearts and minds of Americans in relation to “others.” The Dustan narrative has enjoyed continuous publication in various texts and articles from the time it was first published until today.

On March 15, 1697, the home of Hannah Dustan and her family was attacked by Indians. Dustan had given birth two weeks prior and was unable to escape the attack. Her husband and seven other children managed to escape to a nearby garrison, leaving Dustan and her nurse Mary Neff alone to defend themselves. Neff attempted to escape in order to protect the helpless infant, but was captured by the Indians. Dustan’s captors ordered to get up from her bed and marched her outside. There, Dustan and Neff were joined by several other captives, including a young boy named Samuel Lennardson who had been in captivity for more than a year previously.

The captives were forced into the wilderness where the Indians murdered Dustan’s crying infant by dashing its brains out on the trunk of an apple tree. As the captives were marched several miles into the wilderness, those who tired and slowed the pace were summarily executed and left for the scavengers. The only captives to survive the forced march were Dustan, Neff, and Lennardson.

The Indians and their captives marched approximately 150 miles through various terrains toward an Indian town where the three were expected to run the gauntlet in order to become adopted into the Indian family. The gauntlet was made up of two rows of Indians who stood ready to beat, poke, prod and essentially abuse the captive running between the rows.

Dustan feared this torture greatly and devised a plan to make her escape before she was forced to endure the tortures of the gauntlet. One evening while her captors were sound asleep, Dustan, Neff, and Lennardson took up hatchets and murdered ten of the twelve Indian captors. One woman, badly injured, and a child escaped into the woods. Dustan and the others proceeded to scalp the Indians as proof of their deed and made their escape in a canoe. Although, rewards for scalps had recently been outlawed, Dustan's husband was paid handsomely for the ten scalps they brought back to civilization. Dustan rejoined her family and was able to live the remainder of her life uneventfully. She last appears in a note she wrote in May of 1724 asking to become a member of the Puritan church.

Dustan's narrative was quite clearly a very different captivity narrative than that of Mary Rowlandson. Her violence can only be understood in the context of women's roles in Puritan society. According to Laurel Ulrich, the role of women during the colonial period was clearly defined as that of helpmate to her husband. Typically, women worked within the home, in the yard, and along with neighbors. But work roles could change based on the needs of the husband. For many women this meant taking on the role of "deputy husband":<sup>50</sup> a woman was expected to be an expert in household management and child care as well as able to assist her husband in his economic affairs by becoming his representative and even his surrogate if necessary.<sup>51</sup>

Dustan's actions could be viewed as performing the ultimate deputy husband duty. Had her husband been present, he would have been expected to lead the little

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<sup>50</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives, Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982) 36.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

remnant of English society home. In his absence, she took on his role: she planned a means of escape and took the lead in enacting it. Her behavior was violent — and completely inappropriate had an English man been present. But as it was, she was by necessity the leader and she did what a man would have been expected to do. Indeed, Cotton Mather praised Dustan for showing “manly resolution” when confronting the Indian enemy — a manly resolution, it should be noted, that was viewed as neither savage nor brutal in its effects.<sup>52</sup>

Notwithstanding her violent heroism, Dustan’s violent capture was the focus for the English, underscoring once again the vulnerability of English society to Indian attacks. And once again, the narrative revealed its usefulness in highlighting the brutal savagery of the enemy. In that regard, Dustan’s nursing baby provided a particular hideous example.<sup>53</sup> In an excerpt about the Dustan captivity Cotton Mather wrote:

The party which entered the house when Mr. Dustan left it, found Mrs. Dustan in bed, and the nurse attempting to fly with the infant in her arms. They ordered Mrs. Dustan to rise instantly, while one of them took the infant from the arms of the nurse, carried it out, and dashed out its brains against an apple-tree. After plundering the house they set it on fire, and commenced their retreat, though Mrs. Dustan had but partly dressed herself, and was without a shoe on one of her feet. Mercy was a stranger to the breasts of the conquerors, and the unhappy women expected to receive no kindnesses from their hands. The weather at the time was exceedingly cold, the March-wind blew keen and piercing, and the earth was alternately covered with snow and deep mud.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Cotton Mather, *Decennium Luctuosum*, Boston, 1697, 237. as reprinted in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives, Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982).

<sup>53</sup>Ulrich, 173.

<sup>54</sup> John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c., Relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts, with Geographical Descriptions*, Boston: Dorr, Howland & Co, 1839 [Database On-line]; Available from [http://www.hannahDustan.com/hannah\\_files.html](http://www.hannahDustan.com/hannah_files.html), Accessed on September 6, 2005.

Mather's recounting of the event points to the vulnerability of female captives, a weakness that Mather used as a metaphor for the "vulnerability of English civility, domesticity and piety in the wilderness."<sup>55</sup> These same concerns about English vulnerability were present in the Rowlandson narrative and expressed by Increase Mather. Stories of female captives returned to society could be used to justify the need for more parental and clerical control over women and children, although, in Dustan's case, Mather's account eventually transcends her initial vulnerability and sanctions her aggression.

Women who risked capture during the early American Indian wars often resorted to violence to defend themselves and their children. Hannah Dustan was one such captive and the curious fate of her reputation provides a lens into the variable judgments applied to captives. Dustan's experience was initially viewed as laudable, lifting her to the status of hero among New Englanders.

The Dustan narrative as retold and improved by Cotton Mather illustrates the violent capability of a captured woman and the lengths she was willing to go to free herself. Mather unambiguously referred to Dustan as a hero. He likened her act of aggression to that of Gael, [or more commonly, Jael] in the Bible<sup>56</sup>. Jael killed the Canaanite General Sisera, by pounding stake into his the head. According to Mather, Jael's aggression was an act of heroism rallied and chastised a nation. Jael saved Israel just as Dustan saved the remnant of New England in captivity with her<sup>57</sup>. Laurel Ulrich

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<sup>55</sup> Strong, 144.

<sup>56</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magna Christi Americana, The Ecclesiastical History of New England*, 1702. [Database on-line]; Available from [http://www.hannahDustan.com/hannah\\_files.html](http://www.hannahDustan.com/hannah_files.html), Accessed on July 24, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Ulrich, 162.



in *Good Wives* argues that Mather believed Dustan acted in accordance with God. She “became a killer because moral order around her had broken down. Moving into a vacuum created by war, she did individually what New England had been unable to do collectively.”<sup>58</sup> Cotton Mather saw Hannah Dustan as a true hero acting in accordance with God’s plan.

But when the cultural narrative changed to one in which women were seen as too delicate for violence, Dustan’s actions were evaluated differently. John Warner Barber in his *Historical Collections* reveals the horrors of Dustan’s captivity while at the same time focusing on the “shocking” deeds Dustan committed in her escape.<sup>59</sup>

Long before the break of day, Mrs. Dustan arose, and, having ascertained that they were all in a deep sleep, awoke her nurse and the boy, when they armed themselves with tomahawks, and dispatched ten of the twelve.”<sup>60</sup> Dustan’s reason for taking the scalps of the slain Indians is also questioned by Barber who added that; “... Mrs. Dustan perceived that they had neglected to take their scalps, and feared that her neighbors, if they ever arrived at their homes, would not credit their story, and would ask them for some token or proof.”<sup>61</sup>

The Barber account focuses on Dustan’s ability to take the initiative and defend herself under such difficult circumstances, but at the same time he made Dustan appear

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>59</sup> John Warner Barber, *Historical Collections, Being a General Collection of Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, &c., Relating to the History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts, with Geographical Descriptions*, Boston: Dorr, Howland & Co, 1839 [Database On-line]; Available from [http://www.hannahDustan.com/hannah\\_files.html](http://www.hannahDustan.com/hannah_files.html), Accessed on July 24, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

unnatural through her use of violence. During the early to mid-nineteenth century, Americans began to view the position and role of women in a new light. In *The Bonds of True Womanhood*, Nancy Cott argues that women by “1835 endured subordination to men in marriage and society, profound disadvantage in education and in the economy, denial of access to official power in the churches..., and virtual impotence in politics.”<sup>62</sup>

Many women, especially upper middle-class white women, turned to reform to help their feminist cause, but at the same time male and female authors began to circulate popular literature which included sermons, advice books, novels and essays advocating a limited, but culturally significant role. The cultural narrative of the 1830s expected women to act as wives and mothers. Their primary responsibility was to nurture and maintain their families, to provide religious example and inspiration and provide moral influence on those around them.<sup>63</sup> Women became the moral compass of American life and thought of as too sensitive to be capable of acts of violence. This cultural ideal made Hannah Dustan’s actions extremely problematic.

By the 1820s, Hannah Dustan’s actions are seen as a disgusting anomaly rather than an act of a heroic woman. The Dustan story was all but forgotten until Timothy Dwight revived it in 1821. He followed the account set forth by Cotton Mather but added his own apologetic caveat. Dwight prefaced his work by stating “whether all their sufferings, and all the danger of suffering anew, justified this slaughter may probably be questioned by you or some other exact moralist.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, ed. Barbara Miller Solomon, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 297-298, as reprinted in Laurel Thatcher Ulrich,

John Greenleaf Whittier, evidently convinced that no normal woman would commit such an act, argued that Dustan's aggression was caused by a temporary insanity brought on as a result of seeing her child murdered.<sup>65</sup> Other well-known authors also explored the story of Hannah Dustan, with Henry David Thoreau delicately "shifting his narrative from the murder to the homeward flight along the Merrimack River."<sup>66</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne loathed Dustan: "would that the bloody old hag had been drowned in crossing the Contocook river, or that she had sunk over her head and ears in a swamp, and been there buried, until summoned forth to confront her victims at the Day of Judgment."<sup>67</sup>

Hawthorne's obvious disgust would have bewildered Cotton Mather, but the cultural ideals of the 1830s suggest that his aversion to Hannah Dustan ran deep and his choice of word telling: only a "hag" would be so unfeminine as to commit murder. In an era that proclaimed the delicacy of the "true woman," Dustan could not be viewed as anything other than a "hag."

In the world in which she lived, Dustan's violence was not only possible to imagine, it was necessary. Dustan "had been raised in a world where women slaughtered pigs and fought their neighbors, the Indians."<sup>68</sup> More than a century later, however, religion would become meek and women would be seen as submissive and docile, not

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*Good Wives, Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1982).

<sup>65</sup> John Greenleaf Whittier, *Legends of New England*. Haverhill, Mass. 1831. [Database on-line]; Available from [http://www.hannahdustin.com/hannah\\_files.html](http://www.hannahdustin.com/hannah_files.html).

<sup>66</sup> Ulrich, 172.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

capable of acts of such violence. The Dustan story would become an aberration rather than a tale of heroism.

Just as the narrative of Rowlandson and Dustan express the ambivalence regarding female heroism and victimization, the two narratives are both useful as propaganda. The religious writing of both Increase and Cotton Mather focused on the captivity of Puritan women to highlight the vulnerability of English society. By using the narratives of Dustan, Rowlandson and others to illustrate the ferocity of the Indians, the Mathers were able to persuade their congregations that they needed to commit themselves to a renewed and genuine piety.

In the story of Hannah Dustan, Cotton Mather used words intended to dehumanize Dustan's captors. Mather referred to them as "raging dragons, formidable savages, furious tawnies and those whose tender mercies are cruelties."<sup>69</sup> By retelling the horrors Dustan witnessed when her newborn baby was viciously murdered along the trail and the murders of other captives were tomahawked to death for failing to keep up, Mather demonized the Indians even as he glorified the brutality of Dustan's escape.

Mather's use of the Hannah Dustan story is particularly pronounced, for as the original storyteller, Mather was able to tailor the narrative as a call for repentance and collective humility.<sup>70</sup> At the beginning of the tale, Mather suggested that Dustan's husband left both Hannah and her nurse in the hands of "divine providence" when he escaped with his children.<sup>71</sup> Neff and Dustan were saved from certain death, Mather

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<sup>69</sup> Strong, 127.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>71</sup> Mather, 1999 [1702], 59.

suggested, because their fatigue was understood by God who “gave them to find unexpected favor from the master who laid claim unto them.”<sup>72</sup>

The three basic elements of the female captivity narrative are present in both the Rowlandson and Dustan narratives. Each focuses on the captivity of a white woman by non-white “others” while at the same time highlighting the circumstances of the captivity as both heroic and tragic. Both were used to stereotype the “other”; both were employed as a means to arouse religious fervor. The following chapter will highlight two narratives in which this formula will be stretched, and in one case broken.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Three

### Exceptions to the Traditional Indian Captivity Narrative

As the analysis of Hannah Dustan's narrative indicated, the interpretation of her actions altered considerably when removed from their 17<sup>th</sup> century context and evaluated through the 19<sup>th</sup> century lens of "true womanhood." The narratives that are the focus of this chapter were written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were presumably sensitive to the newer ideals of feminine behavior. What is striking about each, however, is that both "fail" as models of the captivity narrative, not because the actions of their female protagonists are ambiguous, but rather because each narrative alters the standard formula for the captivity story. In doing so, the narratives highlight the inter-relationships of all elements in the classic captivity narrative.

The first narrative is that of Dr. Mary Walker, a physician who practiced on Civil War battlefields. Hers is clearly a captivity narrative, but her captors are white like herself. As we shall see, the tone of her narrative is remarkably different with the omission of a demonized "other."

The second narrative recounts the captivity of Sarah Wakefield. Wakefield's story has all the elements of the traditional female Indian captivity narrative. But in telling her own story, Wakefield insists upon controlling the elements. In particular, Wakefield resists the conventions that would allow her narrative to be used as a form of propaganda to stereotype the savage "other." Instead, Wakefield alters the traditional assignment of the "savage" role; for her, the villain is the American government and its

deplorable treatment of Indians on the Great Plains. In short, the following narratives are notable exceptions.

**Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, *Dr. Mary Walker: The Little Lady in Pants* (1974)<sup>73</sup>**

A major focus of the female captivity narrative is the depiction of a woman's body as a representation of national identity. The Rowlandson and Dustan narratives exemplified this idea as their capture was viewed as an affront to English society revealing the vulnerability of New England when confronted by the Indian "other." Rowlandson made certain that her readers knew that this ultimate violation had not occurred; she had not been raped or molested by her Indian captors. Mather's demonizing description of Dustan's captor's hints that rape was a possible outcome during her capture, although the narrative reveals no such scenario. In both cases, the threat of sexual violation hinges on the racial identity of the captor: the reader is given to understand that the non-white captor is an automatic threat to the white female captive.

This sexually charged scenario, a staple of the captivity narrative, changes dramatically in the captivity stories of the American Civil War. During the war, both sides were American, and hence there was no "other" to take women captive. We know from reports and various newspaper articles that women from both the North and the South donned uniforms and fought in the war. But in the narratives of these captives, the captive women are never portrayed as sexually threatened. Instead, gender issues, rather than racial ones, become prominent. Freed from "real" threat, the female captives are depicted as the objects of humiliation and ridicule for their attempts to play at being men in a man's war. Dr. Mary Walker, captured during the Civil War, struggled to receive acceptance as a surgeon, and following her capture, respect. But in the stories told of her experiences, she is never in any danger.

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<sup>73</sup> Charles McCool Snyder, *Dr. Mary Walker: The Little Lady in Pants*. (New York: Arno Press, 1974).



The story of Dr. Mary Edwards Walker is one rarely talked about, and yet it ought to be. Her story was first published in the newspaper articles that highlighted her work with the Union Army as a field surgeon. Walker earned the grudging respect of her fellow officers and medical staff, but her continued deviation from normal female practices and dress caused much scorn and hilarity on the part of men.

Following the American Civil War, Walker wrote down her story which was published in a fictionalized autobiography titled *Hit* that was published 1871. Further publication of Walker's story has been left to various news articles and one biography by Charles McCool Snyder titled *Dr. Mary Walker: The Little Lady in Pants*, published in 1974. Snyder relied on the diary of Mary Walker and news articles to gather as much of the Walker narrative as possible. His biography on Walker was done as part of a "Women in America" series intended to highlight the accomplishments of American women and the various issues they face within society. In contemporary America the notion of a woman doctor near the front lines of battle is not unusual, but for Mary Walker, it was a walk down a forbidden path.

Mary Walker defied all convention during the nineteenth century when she became one of the first women to graduate from medical school in June 1855. She advocated dress reform for women and worked diligently for women's rights. Her work with the military came with the American Civil War. At the start of hostilities, Dr. Walker went to Washington D.C. to join the Union Army. She was denied a commission but stayed in Washington where she worked in the US Patent Office Hospital as a volunteer nurse. After several months in Washington, Walker was able to find work as a contract field surgeon near the Union front lines. She served at the front for almost two

years; she worked during the Battles of Fredericksburg and in Chattanooga after the Battle of Chickamauga.

Her success as a field surgeon led to her appointment as assistant surgeon in the Army of the Cumberland in September 1863. Dr. Walker made herself a slightly modified officer's uniform to wear, in response to the demands of traveling with the soldiers and working in field hospitals. Her choice of clothing was often criticized by Major General William T. Sherman due to its unfeminine appearance. Dr. Walker wore bloomers and a military inspired over-tunic which resembled the uniforms of Union officers. She continued her service with the 52<sup>nd</sup> Ohio Infantry where she was also asked to serve as a spy. Dr. Walker's intrigue would take place as she crossed enemy lines to treat wounded soldiers on the field of battle. During one such assignment, she was taken captive by Confederate forces. Dr. Walker remained a prisoner of war imprisoned at "Castle Thunder" in Richmond, Virginia from April to August of 1864. She was released when she was exchanged along with fourteen other Union doctors for Confederate surgeons.

Dr. Walker worked for the remainder of the war at a woman's prison in Kentucky. Her work on the battlefield, however, was not forgotten. Despite their differences concerning her dress, General Sherman recommended Walker for a Congressional Medal of Honor. The recommendation was approved and awarded for meritorious service by President Andrew Johnson in November 1865.

Dr. Walker continued her work for women's rights long after the war. She also continued wearing masculine clothing, including a top hat, a wing collar and bow tie. In 1916, the U.S. War Department began a review of all Medals of Honor awarded. The

department rescinded nearly 1000 medals after determining they were not awarded for combat valor above and beyond the call of duty as the newer standard stated. Mary Walker refused to give up her medal and risked imprisonment by wearing it every day until her death in 1919.

After several year of lobbying during the 1960s by Walker's family members, her Medal of Honor was reinstated posthumously in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter. An Army board applauded her "distinguished gallantry, self-sacrifice, patriotism, dedication and unflinching loyalty to her country, despite the apparent discrimination because of her sex."<sup>74</sup>

The reinstatement of Mary Walker's Medal of Honor indicated a change in cultural gender norms in American society. One must remember that at the time Walker was captured, women were expected to act within the bonds of "true womanhood," subservient to men and dedicated to a quiet life of domestic concerns. Just as Hannah Dustan's narrative was vilified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because of the aggressive actions revealed in her narrative, Walker's narrative revealed that she became subjected to the laughter and ridicule of her fellow soldiers and her captors. The narrative depicts Walker as able and willing to serve, but at the same time an affront to the very nature of manhood in the United States. By actively serving as an assistant surgeon in uniform, Mary Walker defied the restrictions of the female sphere. Her behavior fell outside the norm for a proper white woman and thereby alters the focus and meaning of her captivity.

Dr. Walker's narrative suggests that the role of women during the Civil War was far more involved than history would have many American believe. Newspapers

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<sup>74</sup> *Mary Edwards Walker: Civil War Doctor*, [Database on-line]; Available from <http://www.medalofhonor.com/TheOnlyWoman.htm>, accessed: September 6, 2005.

accounts during the Civil War often related of the exploits of women in uniform. Many of the women were found out and sent home while others were exposed as spies and imprisoned. Dr. Walker often contributed to newspaper accounts discussing the involvement of women in the war effort. From the Washington Republican March 17, 1864:

Doctor Mary E. Walker, who is well known to many of our citizens, writes us from Chattanooga an account of a singular case of female martial spirit and patriotic devotion to the flag. Frances Hook's parents died when she was only three years old, and left her, with a brother, in Chicago, Illinois. Soon after the war commenced she and her brother enlisted in the 65th "Home Guards," Frances assuming the name of "Frank Miller." She served three months and was mustered out, without the slightest suspicion of her sex having arisen. She then enlisted in the 90th Illinois, and was taken prisoner in a battle near Chattanooga. She attempted to escape and was shot through the calf of one of her limbs, while said limbs were doing their duty in the attempt. The Rebels searched her person for papers and discovered her sex. The rascals respected her as a woman and gave her a separate room while in prison at Atlanta, Georgia. Doctor Walker describes Frank as of about medium height, with dark hazel eyes, dark brown hair, rounded features, and feminine voice and appearance. Doctor W. is well versed in human nature, as well as anatomy, and she believes that justice to the young woman in question requires that she should be commissioned a lieutenant in the army. The Doctor also argues that Congress should assign women to duty in the army, averring that patriotism has no sex. Whether the president will commission Miss Hook as a lieutenant or Congress will draft Mrs. Walker's countrywomen into the service we know not, but we are certain that the "Doctor" is thoroughly in earnest, and the story of her new protégé is an interesting one."<sup>75</sup>

Walker herself clearly believed that women had the right to participate in the war effort as combatants, but for most American, the account of "Frank Miller's: capture and outing was neither an argument for women's rights nor a captivity narrative: the account is presented as a human interest story and nothing more. Despite the fact that the story centers upon the capture of a white woman, there is no sense whatsoever of her

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<sup>75</sup> *Washington Republican*, March 17, 1864, [Database on-line]; Available from [http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts/women\\_soldiers.htm](http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm), Accessed: September 6, 2005.

vulnerability and even less of a suggestion of danger to American identity. The captive is treated well and kept safe in a separate room. The only things violated in this narrative are conventional expectations about female behavior.

One story form in which conventional expectations are turned upside down is a “joke,” and indeed, nineteenth century newspapers typically treated the idea of women in uniform with humor. There are hundreds of accounts discussing women as soldiers and as prisoners of war. According to the stories, most were treated well and released. Dr. Walker’s own treatment in the press echoes this sentiment. Her participation and role as an Army doctor appeared to be well received, although her views on women’s rights (and, on suspects, her dress) remained a topic for jest.

The Bellville, (TX) Countryman reported the capture of Dr. Walker. True to form the reporter made light of Walker’s dress and mannerism.

A Yankee Surgeoness.—Among the recent captures of Johnston’s army was a female yankee surgeon. A correspondent of the Macon Confederate thus describes her: She is apparently of about twenty eight or thirty summers; a little worn, but still passably good looking. Hair dark and gathered under a silk net; figure about five feet six and rather thin. Her costume is as novel as her position. Bloomer costume of blue broadcloth trimmed with brass buttons; yankee uniform hat, with cord tassels; surgeon’s green silk sash, worn over the right shoulder and across the breast, fastening on the left side. Over her front she wore a blue military overcoat and cape. Lastly she wore boots, (and let me say that, in respect to feet there was more of her person parallel to the earth than strict rules of beauty would require,) plain calfskin boots over her dress. When taken she was near our picket lines with the purpose, as she states, of sending some letters through our lines. She was mounted on a small and rather indifferent looking horse (if you have any tears to shed, prepare to shed them now.) Yes, sir, I say it—I say she was riding a man’s saddle, with—one foot in each stirrup. The Doctor, along with her stirrups, got her boot into it this time. She appeared a little embarrassed—to her credit be it said—but answered promptly and intelligently. She has in her face and

manner the 'unrectified yankee,' but her manners are better than those of a majority of her tribe.<sup>76</sup>

The second element of the female captivity narrative is also difficult to judge in the case of Mary Walker. Judging from the newspaper account, Walker's actions were not likely to be viewed as heroic, and given the decent treatment, neither was she likely to be seen as a victim. The lighthearted account will allow nothing more than the humorous novelty of the occasion.

Walker did, however, defy her captors in one instance demonstrating her spunk and tenacity. On various occasions she was offered the opportunity of freedom. Her southern captors had only one requirement for her release. In keeping with the mocking tone of her captivity, Dr. Walker was told she must remove her manly dress and wear the hoop skirts of a "true woman." Walker, who had been an advocate of female dress reform stood by her principles and refused to change her garb. In the end, it was her skill as a surgeon and her value to the Union Army that made it possible for her to be exchanged for the Confederate male surgeons that the South needed so badly.

One of the more interesting aspects of prisoner of war stories is the issue of what does one write when the enemy is not an "other." This was the case for Dr. Mary Walker. She was certainly a captive, but her captors were white Americans like herself. The newspaper stories that were written about female prisoners during the American Civil War remained lighthearted and respectful though patronizing. The humorous tone was adopted by both sides.

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<sup>76</sup> *Bellville (Texas) Countryman*, August 16, 1864, [Database on-line]; Available from [http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts/women\\_soldiers.htm](http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm), Accessed: September 6, 2005.

A Washington correspondent of the Baltimore *News Sheet*, communicates the following, which is rich enough: While I think of it, I must mention a remarkable ride which occurred in the prison yard the day before yesterday. The lady prisoners are allowed a half hour's exercise in the narrow yard surrounding the prison every day. Mrs. Greenhow, who is remarkable for her cool courage and self possession, proposed to seize and appropriate the horse and market wagon of the Superintendent, which stood in one corner of the enclosure, and enjoy the novelty of a ride. The suggestion was instantly adopted, and the ladies, unmindful of the remonstrances of the sentinels, jumped into the wagon and whipped up. Mrs. Morris had been making a large and beautiful Confederate flag, and she stood now in the front of the wagon, waving it over the heads of the enraged sentinels, who followed the flying party around the enclosure, shouting and cursing, and making lunges at the horse with their bayonets, which only increased the mirth of the gay riders, and frightened the horse to his utmost speed. The uproar became terrible. First came the captain of the guard, shouting, at the top of his lungs, "stop that vehicle; it's contrary to the rules." All in vain. Mrs. Greenhow whipped up the harder, and cried out, "it's the Southern wagon—clear the way." Then the officer of the day rushed in, shouting, "What's all this?" followed by the soldiers from the neighboring guard house, who rushed madly forward to stop the flying animal. It was a scene altogether ludicrous and indescribable in the extreme and has made more comment in Washington than a little. The evacuation of Manassas is nothing to be compared to it."<sup>77</sup>

While the opposing sides of the American Civil War were able to look upon each other with humor as well as disdain, the negative stereotyping of the "other" remained unnecessary. Without the demonic otherness to threaten them, white women captives remain in a familiar place: in these narratives, they are objects of amusement and entertainment their "feeble" attempts at soldiering a lighthearted jest.

By examining the narrative of Dr. Mary Walker during the American Civil War it become obvious that stories concerning female prisoners of war during this particular war do not comply fully with the three basic elements of the captivity narrative. It is true that the Mary Walker was white, but her gender status was by far the bigger concern of the

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<sup>77</sup> "A Scene among the Female State Prisoners at Washington" *Savannah Republican*. April 19, 1862 p.1 c. 5. [Database online]: Available at [http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts/women\\_soldiers.htm](http://www.uttyl.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm)

narrative. If one were to judge levels of victimization or heroism based on past stories and societal norms at the time, Walker's story does not lend itself to the telling of great feats of heroism while in captivity. Nor does her treatment while in captivity warrant a judgment of victimization. And, finally, the use of the narrative as propaganda to stereotype the enemy "other" is not present in the news articles that recounted Walker's capture. If anything stands out in the later reports, it is that Walker herself has become the object of propaganda and stereotyping. Her story is used to admonish women who dare to put on a uniform and play at being soldiers. Walker's story is treated with jest and lightheartedness never fully achieving the status of a traditional female captivity narrative.

During the American Civil War, while fighting among Americans was taking place on the eastern portion of the country, the Indian wars of the west were still being waged on the Great Plains. Just as Mary Walker's narrative challenges the elements of the female captivity narrative, so does the story of Sarah Wakefield. Wakefield used her own narrative as propaganda to chastise the United States government and its military for the atrocities committed against the Indians in the west.



**Sarah Wakefield, *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity* (1864)<sup>78</sup>**

Sarah Wakefield's captivity narrative was first published in 1864. In it, she recounts her experience as a captive of the Sioux during the Dakota wars of 1862. The work went through at least two editions and was recently republished with June Namias as editor in 2002. Throughout its publication history, Wakefield's narrative has remained as she wrote it, with no apparent embellishments on the part of editors and publishing houses. Her account has been analyzed in various texts, including *Women's Indian Captivity Narrative*, edited by Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola in 1998.

What must be added is that when Wakefield's captivity narrative was first published, it was greeted with general outrage, largely because Wakefield used her narrative to defend the Sioux. Indeed, she is completely unapologetic in her criticism of the United States government and its military. Wakefield explains in her narrative that, before the Indians attacked her home, she was afraid of the Sioux. Captivity changed her mind as everyday contact allowed her to see the Sioux as humans, rather than as savages and bloody barbarians. Wakefield intended her narrative to be an apology, a confession and an indictment of what she saw as the real culprits of her captivity, the U.S. government and the military.<sup>79</sup>

Sarah Wakefield and her family left Shakopee, Minnesota, in June of 1861 to begin a new life at the Sioux reservation's upper agency on the Yellow Medicine River. Wakefield's husband was a physician and both looked forward to his new assignment.

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<sup>78</sup> Sarah Wakefield, *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity*. (Shakopee, Minn.: Argus, 1864). reprinted in Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. (New York: Penguin, 1998).

<sup>79</sup> Derounian-Stodola, xv.

The Yellow Medicine area was home to the Dakota Indian tribe. Wakefield and her family arrived at the agency during the yearly government dole of food and pay for the Indians who had sold their lands to the whites. The agency was very crowded with camps set up all around. The wagon train the Wakefield's traveled with held more than \$160,000 in gold to pay the Indians.

Tensions were high as Wakefield tried to settle her family. Not being accustomed to Indian rituals, she was unprepared for the night sounds of council meetings where, it seemed to her, the Indians shouted and screamed a great amount. Her family feared they would be attacked at any moment and spent the first night in fitful sleep. According to Wakefield, the Indians were concerned about a change in administration and wanted to get their pay and rations. This was soon accomplished by the new agent, Major Galbraith. The Indians finally left and went home to their summer camps.

The following year, tensions rose again as the Indians made their way back to the agency for their annual rations and pay. Major Galbraith had told the Indians he would contact them when the pay was available, but to a band of starving Indians, waiting was not an option. In July of 1862, the Dakotas began to grumble and several incidents of violence occurred between the Dakotas and white settlers. The conflict escalated into a six-week war, lasting until September of the same year.

Wakefield attempted to avoid the violence at the start of the war by escaping to Fort Ridgely some thirty miles to the east. She, along with her son Joseph and infant daughter Nellie, took a wagon with one driver to attempt their escape. A short distance outside the agency they were halted by two Indians who were thought to be hunting. One of the braves, called Hapa, took his rifle and shot the wagon driver. He then turned his

weapon on Wakefield and her family. Wakefield was fortunate that the other Indian present, named Chaska, recognized her. They had met in Shakopee where Wakefield and her husband had treated Chaska and his family with kindness. After much argument between Chaska and Hapa, Wakefield was allowed to live and thus became a captive under the protection of Chaska.

Wakefield and her children spent six weeks in captivity. They were under a constant threat from either Little Crow (the great war chief) or Hapa. The Indians had little regard for their captives and threatened to kill them often. Wakefield was fortunate to find kindness with Chaska's family, especially his mother. She made sure that Wakefield and her children were well fed and clothed. Chaska's mother would often take Wakefield into hiding when Hapa or others would threaten to kill the family. Chaska even pretended marriage with Wakefield to prevent her rape by Hapa.

Wakefield survived the six weeks by putting her faith in God and praying for the survival of herself and her family. Chaska and his family were always kind, but the captivity was very hard on Wakefield. Because of the constant threat from either the Indians or the white soldiers, Wakefield was constantly packing up and moving camp. This happened several times, often more than once on the same day. Wakefield tried to remain pleasant and helpful in order to make the Indians respect her and thereby spare her life. Other captives were not so fortunate and were killed for their obstinacy, and more often, because the Indians believed they ate too much.

Wakefield did survive the six weeks of captivity and held on to the hope that her husband was still alive. She joined Chaska and his family at a camp to await the Army to negotiate the terms of her release. Little Crow had moved beyond capture and remained

a constant threat to the captives. Wakefield was repatriated with several other captives and sent to live in horrible tent conditions with the Army. Chaska was arrested for murder and put in jail. Wakefield pleaded for leniency for Chaska and assured the courts that he had protected her and did not commit the murder of the wagon driver. Her pleas were heard and she was promised that Chaska would not be sentenced to death for his involvement with her capture. Wakefield left for Fort Ridgely believing Chaska would be safe. Under some mysterious mix-up in names, Chaska was hanged for a crime he did not commit.

Wakefield was devastated by the news and vowed to write down her story so that the truth would be told about the cruelties and injustices the Indians suffered at the hands of the whites and to reveal Chaska's innocence. Wakefield also explained that had the Indians received their annuities and food rations on time, the war could have been prevented. Wakefield and her two children were reunited with her husband who survived the violent war by escaping to a nearby fort. Both were happy to leave the agency and begin life anew.

The Wakefield narrative both follows and contradicts other female captivity narratives. When compared with that of Mary Rowlandson, Wakefield's narrative reveals all three elements of the traditional story. Wakefield was in fact a white woman taken captive by an Indian "other." Wakefield also was exposed to grave dangers which clearly established her status as a victim. At the same time her endurance and resolution, much like Mary Rowlandson, revealed Wakefield's heroism. The challenge of the Wakefield narrative rests on the conflict between Wakefield's need to defend her captors

and vilify the American military and her simultaneous stereotyping of Indians as brutish barbarians bent on rape and murder.

Looking back to the arguments of Rebecca Blevins Faery concerning the mapping of the North America based on the desires of white men to control not only the Indians but white women as well<sup>80</sup>, the narratives of Wakefield, Rowlandson and Dustan convey a consistent message. During the colonial era, Rowlandson and Dustan lived on the frontier of colonial society, putting them in contact with the Indians. Wakefield, having moved westward with her husband was exposed to Indians on a daily basis. Her narrative contends that the desires of white men for Indian lands put her at risk of capture as war broke out.

Clearly Wakefield's close proximity to the Indians made obvious the differences between white and Indian societies. Her narrative fully complies with the first element of the female captivity story by placing her at the mercy of the Indians. Her husband's inability to protect her from the warring Indians can be likened to that of both Rowlandson and Dustan. In all three narratives the capture of these women illustrates the vulnerability of white society when confronted by the Indians.

The underlying vulnerability of these women's stories is their inability to protect their own bodies. The central issue for women captives is the fear of rape, while for the male reader; the narrative highlights the white male's inability to protect white women. There are two aspects to the Indian rape scenario. The first is the overt appeal of a white woman's vulnerability and the other is the implied sexual prowess of the male Indian. In reality, the incidences of rape in Native American cultures were virtually nonexistent. The claims of rape played into the "sexualization of the captive's vulnerability" and

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<sup>80</sup> Faery, 12.

brought to the realization of readers that white women were not safe. As Castiglia puts it, the narrative played into “a prurient white fantasy.”<sup>81</sup>

By the nineteenth century, Indians, who had previously avoided the act of rape, for cultural reasons such as incest taboos or warrior ethics, began to adopt white cultural practices concerning their captives. This meant rape for some captives as witnessed by Sarah Wakefield in her *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees*. Rape by Indians in the nineteenth century still remained, however, a rare occurrence. White women who were taken captive were often treated as adopted children or were preserved for either ransom or the slave trade.

The question of victimization and heroism is also challenged by the Wakefield narrative. Wakefield’s narrative argues that she remained duplicitous in her attempts to make her captors believe she was worthy of being kept alive. Wakefield had little to fear from her captor Chaska, but there were plenty of threats placed on her life from other Indians in the village, especially Hapa.

Sarah Wakefield survived her six weeks in captivity thanks to the kindness and protection of her captor Chaska. She had known Chaska in her former home of Shakopee, Minnesota. Chaska was willing to do whatever he could to protect her from the murdering Indians of his camp. Many times, Wakefield was hidden to avoid death. Much like Rowlandson, who learned to work among her Indian captors, Wakefield also tried to be pleasant to her Indian captives, knowing her kindness would be rewarded with better treatment. She talked with the women and helped them with their chores. Her kindness paid off. While other white captives in the camp complained of little food and beatings, Wakefield and her children were well fed and clothed.

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<sup>81</sup> Castiglia, 211.

The element of victimization is a critical aspect of the captivity narrative, but there are always exceptions to the story. Sarah Wakefield was clearly victimized during her captivity, but surprisingly it was not always by the Indians, but by her rescuers. According to Derounian-Stodola, Wakefield did not waver from her claim that the Dakotas treated her kindly. She also made claims that the Indians had plenty of reason to rebel in the first place. This kind of talk made Wakefield very unpopular. Viewing her as treasonous, the soldiers lost all respect for Sarah Wakefield and abused her shamefully.<sup>82</sup>

Sarah Wakefield's propagandist attempt to vilify the American government while revealing the atrocities the Indians faced did not completely refute the third element of the female captivity narrative. Although she argued that the Indians treated her kindly her constant need to hide from murderous Indians in the camp and her reports of violence committed by the Indians on other white captives, negated much of her argument.

Sarah Wakefield wrote kindly of her captors, but she too perpetuated stereotypes by focusing on the drunkenness of Hapa and his near rape of her. According to Wakefield it was only the protection of Chaska that prevented Hapa from committing violence upon her person.<sup>83</sup> The Wakefield narrative talked of other Indians who did murder white captives, including women and children. Sarah was forced into the woods on several occasions to avoid the drunken murderous rage of various Indian men in the camp. At one point a man in the next tepee threatened to kill all the white women in the camp and Wakefield reports Chaska as saying "I wish I could kill all the Indians."<sup>84</sup> One

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<sup>82</sup> Derounian-Stodola, 239.

<sup>83</sup> Wakefield, 271.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 268.

woman in the camp was shot in the legs, Sarah ran for the woods as soon as the Indian passed her tepee. Still, she remained resolute in her attempts to vindicate Chaska for his unfortunate death and the atrocities committed by the military.

Wakefield further challenged the stereotyping of the Indian “other” by focusing on whom she argued were the real villains in the west, the United States government. “So this poor down-trodden race is in a dreadful condition. They must starve unless food is sent them by government. Their reservation in this State was a portion of the most beautiful country that is ever known, and they had everything they wished to make them comfortable if they could have only stayed there; but a few evil men commenced their murderous work, and all has gone to ruin.”<sup>85</sup>

The Wakefield narrative clearly conforms to the three elements of the female captivity narrative. Although the narrative presents contrary arguments concerning the heroic white male bent on rescuing white women captives, her narrative reveals that the Indians were also not always kind. Wakefield’s story represents a bridge between the traditional story of female captivity and stories of women who had no wish to be redeemed and chose to remain with their Indian captors.

Just as Wakefield’s narrative challenged to the American military, so too will the narratives of the twentieth century. The next selection of narratives looks at the issue of American women as members of the military who were captured during times of war in foreign lands, American women as prisoners of war. The question is how these stories are told. Are the stories of military female prisoners to be understood as traditional

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<sup>85</sup> Wakefield, 1998 [1864], 312.



American prisoner of war stories or do they fall into the category of female captivity narratives?

## **Chapter Four**

### **Female Captives in the Twentieth Century**

Female captivity stories of the twentieth century share the same constructional elements with the seventeenth century Indian captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Dustan. The difference among these stories once again involves the evolution of American cultural norms. During the twentieth century women began to take on larger roles not only in the workforce but in the military as well. In 1901, the Army established the first permanent nurse corps followed by the Navy in 1908. Due to racial discrimination it was America's white daughters who enlisted into the corps. During World War I, the need for women to fill the roles of clerks and telephone operators as well as nurses opened up opportunities for enlistment in the Army, Navy and the Marine Corps. Active enlistment by women during the First World War set the precedent for women to serve again during World War II.

Although the status of women serving in the military changed dramatically during the first decades of the twentieth century, the cultural norms defining women's status changed very little. Culturally, women were still expected to remain within the bonds of true womanhood and remain in the home and church. Women were still granted less than full citizenship. Until 1920, they could not vote, and coverture — the principle that a woman was a legal extension of her husband — had been modified, not entirely eliminated. The total war effort of World War II would find women being recruited not only into the military but into defense plants as well. America embraced the image of "Rosie the Riveter" and encouraged women to work to support their husbands and sons on the battlefield while at the same time expecting them to remain submissive and

womanly. Following the war, women were urged to “go home” from their war efforts and resume life under a revitalized ideal of domesticity. The narratives concerning women taken captive during World War II were subject to the cultural gaze of the late 1940s and 1950s. According to Betty Friedan, women learned that truly feminine women did not want careers, higher education, political rights, or independence.<sup>86</sup> According to Christopher Castiglia, the “captivity” of white women has various definitions. He argues that captives were able to renegotiate nationhood through the deconstruction of the American identifiers: citizenship, subjectivity and freedom.<sup>87</sup> Captivity therefore becomes the constitutive opposite of freedom. White women who are taken captive and then returned to society are “set free.” Captivity, however, can also increase awareness of the differences between what it truly means for a white male American to be free and what it means for a woman to be free in America.

Accordingly, women captives at times experienced “freedom” in a manner that altered their prior consciousness of their place in white society. Women who wrote of their captivity would often expand their stories to encompass their feeling of “captivity” within white society. There they were never free of preconceived identities, especially gender identity. By writing about the similarities between captivities, women developed a new language illustrating the double constrictions of captivity as prisoners as well as “captivity” at home.

Women who found themselves on the World War II battlefield were exposed to the same dangers as their male counterparts; capture by the enemy made them, at least

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<sup>86</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1963), 46.

<sup>87</sup> Castiglia, 10.

officially, prisoners of war. The narratives of these experiences, however, bear little resemblance to conventional (male) prisoner of war stories. For example, the narratives of the Army and Navy nurses captured during the battle for the Philippines and Guam demonstrate the impact of cultural gender norms in the telling of their stories. When such stories are told at all, the World war II narratives conformed much more closely to the stories of Early American women taken captive by the Indians than they did the accounts of soldiers captured by the enemy. The themes of the “racial other” and a threatened female sexuality are dominant; unmistakably, the narrative is an Indian captivity story.

Even the dramatic expansion of women’s military involvement in the late twentieth century has failed to challenge the cultural dominance of the traditional captivity narrative. Following World war Two, President Truman opened up the military services to all. He eliminated restriction on recruiting not only for minority races, but for women as well. During the 1970s, under the Carter administration, the military changed its policies and developed an all-volunteer force. This new notion of volunteerism left military jobs of many kinds open to women. As a result women began to enlist in large numbers, many for the steady employment and even more for the benefits. By the time the first Iraqi war took place in 1991, women were an integral part of the daily workings of the military. Because of this, women expected to go to war alongside their male fellow soldiers and do their part to liberate Kuwait. What follows is an examination of three very distinct stories that demonstrate the expanding role of women in the military, but that also illustrate the persistence of the formulaic female captivity narrative.

**Army and Navy Nurses during World War II, *All This Hell, U.S. Nurses Imprisoned by the Japanese* (2002)<sup>88</sup>**

The story of Army and Navy nurses held captive in Japan and the Philippines during World War Two was first told in newspapers and radio programs during the war. The story, however, received very little coverage following the war with the exception of accounts in medical and nursing journals until 1983. In that year, the nurses were recognized by President Ronald Reagan and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Through the use of the Army Nurse Corps' Oral History Program these brave women were finally able to tell their story. The result was a television documentary titled *We All Came Home*, released in 1986, and various biographies. Two in particular stand out. The first, *We Band of Angels* by Elizabeth M. Norman was published in 1999, and the second, *All This Hell*, by Evelyn M. Monahan and Rosemary -Greenlee, was published in 2000. The story of the nurses captured in the Philippines is just now beginning to be told. History should prove that the story has more than one telling in it.

The various captive narratives of the U.S. nurses in the Philippines and Guam are best told as one. Each prisoner of war suffered her own personal hell, but together they were able to survive more than three years of warfare and captivity to return home following their liberation. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, nurses serving in the Pacific islands found themselves embroiled in combat. Within two days of the bombing, the American-held island of Guam was overrun by Japanese forces. Five Navy nurses were taken captive and transported to Japan where they remained prisoners of war until August 1942. The sixty-seven Army and Navy nurses that remained in the Philippines

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<sup>88</sup> Evelyn M. Monahan and Rosemary Neidel -Greenlee, *All This Hell, U.S. Nurses Imprisoned by the Japanese*. (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

were not so fortunate. Following a month-long battle for the island of Corregidor, the nurses, along with other medical staff and the wounded, were placed in an internment camp at Santo Tomas and two other locations. The nurses remained in the camps for three years until the camps were liberated in February of 1945.

The horror of war that was witnessed by the nurses in the Philippines is a testament to the courage and dedication these women had toward their patients and service. At the start of the Japanese attack, the local hospitals of Manila and Luzon were bombed heavily. What had started out as short working shifts became days without rest, with operating rooms in constant use around the clock. The nurses changed from their prim white uniforms into dungarees and khaki shirts. Gone were the Officer's Club dinners and parties on the beach.

Eventually, the nurses were ordered to forward positions in the Bataan jungle to set up field hospitals. Three hospitals were established, none with sufficient medicine or sterile equipment. Patients were bedded down under the trees and the nursing staff lived in much the same way. Malaria was a big problem among the nursing staff and the inadequate diet left the women suffering from dysentery. Still they continued to care for their patients until the field hospitals were overrun. Most of the nurses in Bataan were able to escape back to the island of Corregidor where a previously planned defensive tunnel called the Malinta Tunnel had been built. The tunnel had been built in the 1920s under a strategic defense plan called War Plan Orange 3. Intended to secure U.S. troops in case war broke out on the islands, the tunnel had been built to function as a hospital and lay under more than 100 feet of rock. The main shaft was 750 feet long, 15 feet high

and 25 feet wide.<sup>89</sup> There were twenty additional tunnels that branched off the main with seven others running parallel. It was in these seven that the medical staff went to work and live. The final stand on Corregidor lasted for nearly a month. As a result, food and medical supplies ran out while the supply of newly wounded constantly increased. The commander, General Wainwright, finally called for surrender on May 6, 1942. Japanese soldiers and medical teams swarmed the tunnel facility and remained for several days until all could be evacuated to Manila. The nurses were treated as civilians and were sent to Santo Tomas to be interned with other American civilians. Military prisoners were kept at a separate facility in Manila.

The prisoners of Santo Tomas had already established guidelines and had elected representatives to present their grievances to the Japanese. The nurses were at first assigned the mundane duties of cleaning the latrines and facilities, but finally convinced the Japanese that their nursing skills were put to better use in the makeshift hospital. During the years of internment, several of the nurses were able to work at civilian hospitals in town where they cared for the more seriously ill patients. Japanese officials demanded a high level of respect, but struggled to maintain it among the prisoners and especially from several of the nurses. Eventually, the Japanese retaliated and, during the second year of captivity, the nurses were forced to remain inside the walls of Santo Tomas.

Food was provided but there was never enough of it. During the first several months the prisoners were given two meals a day consisting of corn mush for breakfast and rice with vegetable stock for dinner. During the first year, the detainees were allowed to supplement their diet with food sold by local vendors. The Japanese even set

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<sup>89</sup> Monahan and Neidel -Greenlee, 67

up a canteen that sold coffee and cigarettes to the prisoners. Sugar was a precious commodity and was the first item to become reduced in ration. At first, each person was allowed four teaspoons of sugar at breakfast; by mid-war there was none.

Food stores saved by the internment committee were made available until they too ran out. The Japanese cut back to one meal a day and the only meat provided was fish often unfit for human consumption. At the end of three years the nurses were barely able to continue with their nursing duties. All around them, people were dying of starvation. Several of the nurses had lost their vision due to a lack of vitamins, and beriberi left many too swollen to walk. Few expected to survive.

Survival was the most pressing issue in the camp. The nurses stuck together and found ways to stretch their food supplies. Work shifts continued but on a much smaller scale. Near Christmas of the third year, a B-17 could be heard overhead. The prisoners looked up to see leaflets falling from the sky. It was a note from the United States stating that they were coming to rescue the prisoners. That rescue finally came in February, and not a moment too soon. The Japanese had planned to murder all the prisoners before surrendering the camps, but the American military managed to liberate Santo Tomas in time. Japanese soldiers fired upon the camp from elevated positions in town and several prisoners were killed or wounded including two of the nurses. Finally after several days of fighting, the Philippines were once again under American control. Prisoners and several nurses from other camps were liberated as well. The nurses were treated to a first class ride home in American airplanes. They were given fresh uniforms and in Hawaii the nurses were given silk stockings to wear.



Many were given time to recover in hospitals and most returned to duty once healed. For the duration, that was the plan. The nurses were not asked to return to the Pacific for the remainder of the war, but many found jobs either nursing in stateside Army hospitals or as traveling saleswomen for war bonds. Surprisingly, they seldom spoke of their captivity. The women had been asked not to discuss their capture and most obeyed until some time after the war ended. Their silence signaled they had become “ladies” again.<sup>90</sup>

The stories of the Army and Navy nurses of World War Two highlight the duality of the first element of a female captivity narrative. Their gendered position is clearly depicted by the subservient role the female nurses play to the more dominant role of their male counterparts. Women who joined the nurse corps were given military ranks but not accorded the respect and courtesy that the rank usually conferred. According to authors Monahan and Neidel-Greenlee, the nurses “relative rank did not confer military title, and all army and navy nurses were addressed as Miss.”<sup>91</sup> The nurses went directly from working as civilians in civilian hospitals to military hospitals without the benefit of military training. They were given six white nursing uniforms to wear that were indistinguishable from that of civilian uniforms except for the rank and insignia on the collar. Army and navy nurses were not rendered the proper military courtesies of a military officer and were not entitled to a salute.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, ix.

<sup>91</sup> Monahan and Neidel-Greenlee, 4.

Nurses arriving in the Philippines “disembarked from transport ships wearing high heels, chiffon dresses, picture hats and white gloves.”<sup>92</sup> Their arrival looked more like an entrance to a high school prom rather than military nurses reporting for duty. The ladies were required to dress for dinner and long evening wear was packed along with the six crisp white uniforms. The idea that these women were to look and act like princesses rather than Army nurses underscored the “captivity” that women experienced at home.

This lack of freedom as home is underscored by the military’s stance after the nurses’ release. A three-year prisoner of war experience is scarcely a high school prom, but the nurses’ actual experiences, many of them harrowing, were declared off limits. As Lieutenant Colonel Hattie R. Brantley recalls:

You didn’t talk about sex and you didn’t talk about having been a prisoner of war. When we came home, so help me, we had what they called a ‘reorientation’ in Little Rock, Arkansas. I was assigned to go there and be debriefed. As sure as I am standing here, that guy stood up there and said ‘Now you’re going off to your assignments and whatever you do just keep it (combat and POW experience) to yourself, don’t talk about it.’ They absolutely told us that. They treated it as if it was a stigma.<sup>93</sup>

Initially then, in the early postwar period, the story of the nurses of Santo Tomas is no story at all, but rather the “silenced” narrative. The question, of course, is why this extraordinary experience was for so long only the “Story Never Told.” One strong possibility is that given the cultural norms of the 1940s and 1950s, the only imaginable narrative was the familiar female captivity story, a story perhaps too harrowing for the cheerful blandness of the period.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Monahan and Neidel-Greenlee, 177

Certainly, the nurses' tale potentially contained all the elements of a frightening perhaps even lurid, captivity narrative. The nurses were white women; their captors the non-white Japanese, a group already dehumanized and demonized in the wartime American imagination. A forced confrontation with the story of nurses' vulnerability to such "savages" was perhaps too troubling to introduce, particularly given the reality that for three long years, the nurses had been beyond the American's ability to rescue them. What is clear is that the story that the nurses might have told was potentially sordid; it most certainly was not compatible with the preferred postwar narratives of heroic American soldiers.

Certainly the actual treatment of the rescued nurses reinforces the suspicions that the government wanted them thought of as anything but combatants. None of these women who faced combat would earn a Combat Infantry Badge; that honor was reserved for the men. The history of World War Two would focus on the men who earned the badges and the women who served would disappear into obscurity. Even later members of the Nurse Corps would not learn of the POWs of World War Two.

Ironically, the story was that was perhaps too lurid to tell after the war had been useful during it. Although the nurses in captivity at the time most certainly did not know it, in at least one case, the American government acknowledged the captive nurses by appropriating their image as propaganda.



The poster's imagery draws upon precisely those themes that were too loaded to repeat after the war: a caricature of a bestial Japanese soldier, the women behind barbed wire, clearly helpless and vulnerable. At the moment that the poster was printed, no rescue was possible. The American people are urged to respond in the only way possible: buy war bonds.

In the 1980s, when the nurses themselves began to speak of their experience, the most notable feature of their narrative was their insistence that they were combatants, not vulnerable and threatened white women held by the Japanese, but professionals who insisted upon doing their jobs. In their own stories, they emerge as heroes. For example, during the heaviest fighting while U.S. forces were evacuating field positions and the field hospitals in the Philippines, nurses stayed behind to care for the wounded. One such nurse was Lt. Ann Mealer, who was offered the opportunity of escape on the U.S. Submarine *Spearfish* during the final stand on Corregidor. Lt. Mealer declined the offer.

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<sup>94</sup> "Work to Set 'Em Free," US Government Printing Office, [Database on-line]; Available from <http://userpages.aug.com/captbarb/posters.html>, Accessed on July 24, 2005.

She recalled that “she did not want to leave as long as there’s a patient in the hospital.”<sup>95</sup> Mealer’s dedication to duty cost her the next three years of her life.

Other stories revealed the same courageous dedication during captivity. During the last several months in the camp, food was so scarce that the internees were dying of starvation. The nurses, although they were barely capable of standing, continued to go to work each day and care for the sick in the makeshift hospital, actions that eventually earned them bronze stars.

Although they offer little in the way of detail, the nurses’ own stories reveal that they lived with the constant fear that the Japanese would attack them. There is no mention of sexual assaults on the women by their Japanese captors, but there is the admission that the nurses feared this possibility as it was common knowledge that the Japanese had raped thousands of Chinese women in Nanking during the Japanese invasion of China during 1937.<sup>96</sup> The nurses had no reason to expect better treatment, and indeed, most confessed that they had little hope of survival. Their narratives do not, however, dwell on the possibility. If the silence that the government demanded of them following the war was owing to the fear their stories would take the form of a horrifying captivity narrative, it is worth noting that the nurses apparently had no desire to play the role of the vulnerable white captive. In their own narratives recently told, they insist upon playing the part that the government was slow to acknowledge: they cast themselves as professionals, combatants taken prisoner of war.

What is hinted at in this strange history of the nurses’ story become overt in the later wars of the twentieth century. The cultural norms regarding women’s proper role

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<sup>95</sup> Monahan and Neidel -Greenlee, 84.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 59.

have undergone a drastic change as has the status of women in the military. The following narrative of Major Rhonda Cornum illustrates the difficulty of maintaining the pervasive elements of the female captivity narrative when the main actor does not allow the story to be told as such.

**Major Rhonda Cornum, *She Went to War* (1992)<sup>97</sup>**

The autobiography of Gulf War veteran Rhonda Cornum has already enjoyed several printings. Originally published in 1992, the text is currently in its second edition. The narrative itself has been cited in several works discussing the issue of women at war. Because of the controversy surrounding women in combat it can be expected that the Cornum story will continue to find a home on bookshelves and in the works of historians for quite some time.

Cornum agreed to write her story at the behest of co-author Peter Copeland. Cornum knew that eventually her story would be told and she wanted to be the one who determined how her capture would be perceived. In essence, Rhonda Cornum did not want her story to be told as a female captivity narrative. She preferred that the American cultural gaze view her story as just another American prisoner of war story, a popular genre in the late twentieth century. A discussion of the narrative will show that despite Cornum's best efforts, her story is still perceived as a traditional female captivity narrative.

As a major in the Army's medical corps and a flight surgeon, Rhonda Cornum donned her desert camouflage flight suit and boarded a plane taking her into the heat of battle during the Gulf War. Cornum was a flight surgeon assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and she was expected to go on combat search and rescue missions to bring home downed pilots. On February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1991, that was her mission. She boarded a helicopter with seven other crew members to find a missing Air Force pilot. Shortly after take off

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<sup>97</sup> Rhonda Cornum and Peter Copeland, *She Went to War, the Rhonda Cornum Story*. (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1992).

and barely into enemy territory, the helicopter was shot down. Only three survived the crash. Cornum was one of the lucky ones. She and the other two were quickly captured by Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard.

Cornum suffered serious injuries during the crash. She had two broken arms, a crushed knee, and a bullet wound. She was pulled from the wreckage along with fellow soldier Troy Dunlap. In an effort to make him feel better, Cornum told Dunlap it was going to be okay,<sup>98</sup> an overly optimistic assessment. The Iraqi soldier did not seem to know what to do with their two captives. Finally, Cornum and Dunlap were loaded into a truck and driven away from the crash site. Cornum struggled to maintain consciousness. Her injuries were very painful and Dunlap tried to help by laying his stronger leg over her to stop the jolts from the rough ride. The two were taken to a bunker where Cornum was questioned by an Iraqi officer. She gave her name, unit, and job. She decided any other information would not be forthcoming. The officer noticed her dog tags and wedding ring on a chain around Cornum's neck. These he took and told Cornum they were finished and she was escorted outside again.

Rhonda Cornum was now an Iraqi prisoner of war with no expectation of preferential treatment. At most she just prayed she would make it home to be with her husband and 14-year-old daughter Regan. Cornum was driven from bunker to bunker where each Iraqi officer seemed to deny any responsibility for the captives. After about the third stop Cornum nearly passed out due to loss of blood. She had no idea where the blood was coming from.

Once again she was loaded into a truck along with Dunlap and driven across the desert. While on the road she was molested by a guard. He tried to kiss Cornum and

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<sup>98</sup> Cornum and Copeland, 16.



fondle her breasts. While trying to pull down Cornum's flight suit, Cornum was forced to scream out in pain. Twice more the guard tried to molest her, and each time Cornum screamed, the guard stopped his molestation. Cornum was most afraid that Dunlap would try to protect her and get himself killed. She attempted to reassure him by squeezing his ankle with her badly injured hand and arm.

Finally, they arrived at their destination, a small structure approximately 30 minutes from the bunkers. Cornum and Dunlap were forced into the building and led to small cinder block cells. Surprisingly, Cornum found herself in an even more difficult position. When she was finally given a moment's peace, she discovered she needed to use the bathroom. This resulted in a great bit of discomfort on both her behalf and that of her captors. Cornum needed their help to get out of her flight suit. After several minutes of discussion and argument the guards finally figured out the problem and helped Cornum into a robe. She was finally able to relieve herself and assess the damage to her body.

Rhonda Cornum spent her time in captivity moving around to various locations, being interrogated at each new stop. She was seen at a medical clinic to address her injuries and somewhere during her captivity she and Dunlap were joined by Staff Sergeant Daniel Stamaris, one of the two door gunners from Cornum's helicopter crew. They also picked up Captain Bill Andrews along the way. Both men were injured, but to Cornum's relief she finally knew where Andrews was located. He was the downed pilot she was sent to rescue.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 108.

The war only lasted a few days and in that time Cornum continued to be shuffled from place to place. After having her broken arms set, she was transported to what looked like another prison in Baghdad. She was then dressed in a yellow prison suit, blindfolded and driven along with Stamaris to a hotel. With very little ceremony she was released and left with other prisoners at the posh hotel being used by the International Red Cross.

At the hotel, Cornum discovered she was not the only female soldier taken captive. Specialist Melissa Rathburn-Nealy had been taken prisoner on January 30<sup>th</sup> when the truck in which she was riding got lost. She and the driver were picked up by an Iraqi patrol. The following morning, the prisoners were taken to the airport where they boarded a plane headed to Riyadh and then to Bahrain. They were finally taken to the docks in Bahrain where the *USS Mercy*, a hospital ship, waited to take care of the former prisoners. It was here that Cornum was reunited with her husband Kory, an Air Force flight surgeon, also stationed in the Middle East. Rhonda Cornum was soon returned home to begin her recovery and continue her career in the Army.

In the aftermath of the Gulf war, two unique stories were waiting to be told. Two American servicewomen had been held as prisoners of war and the question was whether their stories could transcend three centuries in which the formulaic captivity narrative had been the model for a woman's war story. On the face of it, the experience of both women seemingly supplied the required elements. Both women were white. Both had been held captive by non-white males, enemies easily stereotyped as the savage "other." Cornum, made exceedingly vulnerable by her injuries, had endured sexual assault. And both women not only could be seen as metaphorically representing the nation, but as

uniformed soldier who quite literally represented America. In a war in which women's increased visibility as military personnel was so notable, it would have been surprising if their stories had not been told. And, in an atmosphere where traditional ideas about women persisted, it would also have been surprising if the stories told had been something other than a modernized version of the Indian captivity tale. By those criteria, the story that eventually emerged — and the story that did not — were both surprising.

Melissa Rathburn-Nealy was the first enlisted female prisoner of war in American history, but her celebrity was both short-lived and unpleasant. Following her liberation from an Iraqi prison, Specialist Rathburn-Nealy rushed back to El Paso, Texas, where she married her fiancé almost immediately. Now Melissa Coleman, the young 20-year-old specialist hoped to continue her career without incident. That would not be the case. Hate mail concerning her marriage began to arrive shortly after the wedding. Coleman had married an African American, a circumstance that did not conform to the preferred cultural narrative. Coleman left the Army in 1993. While the young soldier had obviously “fit” the formula by virtue of being a white female, her marriage to an African American destroyed the “prurient white fantasy” and her story was soon forgotten.

Rhonda Cornum proved to be a better representative of the nation.

Major Cornum's narrative was viewed under the lens of representing the nation and her actions were judged as such. By the time Rhonda Cornum was taken captive during Operation Desert Storm, America had been inundated with images of women acting in heroic roles. Sherrie Inness discusses the changing roles of women within popular culture in her book titled *Action Chicks*.<sup>100</sup> Inness argues that the movies, comic books,

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<sup>100</sup> Sherrie Inness, editor. *Action Chicks: Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 3.

video games, and television series depicting women as action heroes have created a new cultural norm concerning female behavior. In the 1970s, there were the explosive crime capabilities of *Charlie's Angels* and *The Bionic Woman* that in their popularity demonstrated that there was an audience for "tough" women. The movies that followed, including *Aliens* and *Terminator*, depicted their female characters as tough and strong without the sexual overtones of the earlier narratives. Later movies with female lead action heroes such as *Lara Croft* also challenged traditional gender roles applied to women. The lead characters exhibited a confounding set of traits that revealed "access to a variety of emotions, skills and abilities traditionally defined as either masculine or feminine."<sup>101</sup> The result, Inness argues, is a dual-role status that allows the female characters to act the part of male action heroes while at the same time restricting them to traditional female gender, sexual, racial and ethnic stereotypes. Inness further suggests that women by the end of the twentieth century are now allowed to act violently within certain parameters, basically prescribed as those that men are willing to tolerate. But have these new behavioral possibilities stretched the female captivity narrative beyond recognition? Was it possible by the time of the Gulf War to tell a fundamentally different story about an American woman in captivity?

Clearly, a new story was Rhonda Cornum's intention. She insisted on writing her own narrative account of her captivity, released in 1992 as *She Went to War*. Her depiction of herself has much in common with the stories that the World War II nurses finally told about their experiences. In Cornum's account, as in theirs, the key characteristic is professionalism. Cornum presents herself as thoroughly dedicated to her

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 8.

job as a flight surgeon. She jumped at the chance to go on a search and rescue mission to save a downed F-16 pilot. During her captivity, when she came across the pilot Bill Andrews, her first thoughts were of his condition and thankfulness that she was finally with her patient. Her own injuries made it impossible for her to check on Andrews, but the narrative reveals that she maintained her professionalism and, more importantly, her sense of humor throughout her captivity. The most potentially explosive aspect of Cornum's story is her account of her sexual molestation at the hands of her Iraqi captors. In all respects, this incident could easily fulfill the most lurid aspect of the captivity narrative: the potential for a sexual assault upon a white woman committed by a non-white — and presumably brutal — captor. Cornum's narrative does highlight the moment when she was abused sexually by her captors, but in her telling Cornum chooses not to conform to the traditional captivity narrative. She turns the focus away from the molestation and places it instead on the ridiculousness of the situation. Her nonchalance in describing the incident suggests that, once captured, she expected to be raped by the Iraqis as the captivity narrative would suggest. That narrative calls for the sexual brute as captor and Cornum's captors were more than willing to play the part. Cornum's tone is not, however, that of an hysterical victim: "Suddenly he started pawing my head and face and trying to push the muddy, blood-caked strands of hair out of my face. He kissed me on the mouth and face. I thought why does he want to do this? I couldn't believe it. Normally, I don't consider myself ugly, or even unattractive, but all I felt then was beat up and dirty. I certainly wasn't amorous. I remember thinking Hey, you can do better than this."<sup>102</sup> Cornum survived the molestation and managed to keep her fellow prisoner

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<sup>102</sup> Cornum, 49.

Sergeant Dunlap from reacting. It was a difficult ride, but quickly over, and she never saw the guard again. Cornum was able to use her own form of propaganda to diminish what could have become a very difficult and potentially career-ending event in her life. By being so direct about the incident in her book, and by treating it with humor, she was able to lessen its impact on both herself and the story she wanted to tell.

Rhonda Cornum endured her sexual abuse in captivity quietly. Later, she attempted to outsmart the media by never mentioning the incident until the book's release. In a report in the *New York Times*, she explained her delay in publicly mentioning the molestation and the very brief mention she gave the incident in her book. She was concerned that her mistreatment would be "blown out of proportion and would be used by those who want to keep women out of combat."<sup>103</sup> Cornum trumped both government propagandists and the media by keeping her story to herself and thereby controlling her own narrative. Her refusal to become a pawn in the media spotlight, and possibly for the army as well helped her to defy the traditional use of the female captivity narrative as propaganda. The narrative's account of the sexual depravity of the Iraqi guard did, however, continue to perpetuate the stereotype of the "other" as a sexual brute bent on the rape and molestation of American white women.

Although the cultural norms of America had changed greatly during the later half of the twentieth century, and as Sherrie Inness indicated, women were allowed a certain amount of violence. A female soldier's violent capability did not necessarily mean, however, that America was ready to discuss openly the capture of one of its female

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<sup>103</sup> Leela Jacinto, "Girl Power Women Join the Boys in Combat, But Not Without a Fight." *ABCNews.com*. July 11, 2003 [Data-base online]: Available from [http://www.realnews247.com/girl\\_power.htm](http://www.realnews247.com/girl_power.htm), Accessed on September 6, 2005

troops. Just as the female captive nurses of World War II were forced to remain silent about their experience, the government struggled with how or if the story for women captured in Iraq should be told.

Americans, however, would continue to find opportunities to tell captivity stories when it was deemed to be in the nation's best interest. Sometimes the untold story was the propaganda. During Operation Desert Shield, Specialist Melissa Rathburn-Nealy had been taken captive by Iraqi soldiers on January 30, 1991. She and fellow soldier David Lockett got separated from their convoy with the 233<sup>rd</sup> Transportation Company while delivering supplies to troops in Kuwait. The first Pentagon reports listed two soldiers missing, but did not name them, and it would be another two weeks before the two would be listed as missing in action despite numerous reports that they had been captured.

On February 12, 1991, the Pentagon finally listed Rathburn-Nealy as a prisoner of war. Critics have speculated on the "information gap" relating to this case. The loss of a servicewoman in a combat zone would be unusual, if not embarrassing, to the Americans the two captive soldiers would certainly have been attractive media targets had they been reported as what they were: the first known black man and the only female in the U.S. military to be missing since World War II.<sup>104</sup>

The Rathburn-Nealy captivity narrative illustrated the government's willingness to misinform the public and avoid media coverage of women taken captive during war. The popular coverage of fellow POW, Major Rhonda Cornum, helped to alleviate any worries the government may have had about public response to female prisoners of war. By the time America became embroiled in the Second Gulf War, any qualms about

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<sup>104</sup> "Operation Desert Shield" *POWnetwork.org*. [Database on-line]; Available from <http://www.pownetwork.org/gulf/rd035.htm>, Accessed September 6, 2005.

revealing the capture of a female soldier were gone on the part of the American propaganda machine. The capture of Private First Class Jessica Lynch would become a media frenzy at the behest of military and government officials.



**Private First Class Jessica Lynch, *I am a Soldier, Too* (2003)<sup>105</sup>**

The story of the capture and rescue of private First Class Jessica Lynch is perhaps the best known incident in the early days of the Iraq war. Lynch's story has been the subject of television movies, magazine articles, and Internet blogs. Her authorized biography, written by Rick Bragg and titled *I am a Soldier, Too*, made the New York Times bestseller list, has gone through several printings, and is expected to maintain a reading audience for years to come.

The narrative itself, however, highlights the difficulties of women in a captive situation in today's modern combat environment. In part due to government manipulation, in part due to the quick response nature of today's modern media, the story of one captured narrative, and just as quickly understood in terms of the formulaic plot of the captivity narrative, and just as quickly incorporated into national propaganda. Over three centuries after Mary Rowlandson, the Jessica Lynch story reveals the continuing power of the female captivity narrative.

The year 2003 found the United States once again embroiled in a war with Iraq. Women were again called to the front to work with their units to put down the Hussein regime. Private First Class Lynch knew the dangers of war, but did not expect to be confronting the enemy in her role with the 507<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company.

Lynch's captivity story began on March 23<sup>rd</sup> when her company was convoying through the desert with several other units, bringing supplies to soldiers in southern Iraq. The convoy stretched for miles and the 507<sup>th</sup> was bringing up the rear. As trucks got mired in the deep sands or broke down, trucks in the rear got further and further behind.

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<sup>105</sup> Rick Bragg, *I am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2003).

Lynch's unit drove through the night in an attempt to catch up. Somewhere along the road, one of the trucks ahead of Lynch's missed a turn at the city of Nasiriya.<sup>106</sup>

Moments later the five-ton truck Lynch was driving broke down and she was quickly picked up by her best friend, Lori Piestewa, in a Humvee. The two friends, along with two sergeants, quickly got back in line only to find themselves under enemy fire.

Somehow they had driven into the middle of a fire fight in downtown Nasiriya. Bullets riddled the Humvee and Lynch could only hunch down in the seat and pray.

The convoy then tried to turn around but became bogged down in the sand. Lynch saw her fellow soldiers being killed before her eyes, but first she thought they might escape. The Humvee was the only vehicle with enough speed to outrun the Iraqis. But it too was stopped by a rocket propelled grenade and crashed headlong into an American tractor trailer.

The convoy had split into three groups. The last ten vehicles were the slowest and did not make it through the gauntlet. The Marine unit riding with the convoy went back to find the last group of ten trucks only to find the trucks empty with no wounded and no dead in sight. They had been taken. There were seventeen in all. Jessica Lynch was one of the seventeen. Lynch was badly injured in the crash. Her best friend Lori died as a result of head wounds and the two sergeants riding along were killed at the scene. Lynch remembers nothing of what happened after the crash. She awoke sometime later in an Iraqi military hospital looking badly bruised and beaten. Private Lynch's more obvious injuries included a broken arm, a crushed leg, a broken back, and head trauma. She was moved by ambulance later that afternoon to Saddam Hussein General Hospital where she would stay for the rest of her captivity.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 8.

Lynch was as helpless as a new baby and the hospital where she was kept was in sore need of medical supplies. The Iraqi doctors, however, did what they could for Lynch by setting her broken limbs and performing an operation that saved her life. There was no pain medication to be had, but her nurse sang to her to help her sleep. Lynch did not know why they were taking care of her, but the doctors seemed to sense that she was a valuable patient. Iraqi guards did not see it the same way and accused the doctors of being traitors.

Word leaked to the Americans that Lynch was being held at the hospital. The Fedayeen were using the hospital as a headquarters building. Both sides wanted Jessica Lynch and she could only lay there helpless and praying for rescue in her bed. Rescue would come for Lynch. An Iraqi citizen made reports to the Marines regarding her location. He also reported that Lynch was being interrogated and brutalized by the Fedayeen who were using the hospital as a headquarters. Plans were made to free her and on April 1<sup>st</sup>, Lynch heard a lull in the activity outside her hospital room. The Fedayeen had abandoned the hospital and outside the only sound that could be heard was bombing in distant streets. Around midnight all was quiet when a man in her room pointed out the window and told Lynch to look. She couldn't see anything but she could hear the steady beat of a helicopter.

The helicopter could only mean that the Americans had finally taken the city and Lynch would be saved. Lynch's rescuers were none other than a specially selected group of American Special Forces. The team members filmed the rescue and quickly turned the hospital into chaos as they ordered doctors, nurses, and patients to the floor. Lynch cowered in her bed on the second floor as soldier could be heard shouting her name

through the halls. All at once, a soldier was at the foot of Lynch's bed. He announced himself as an American soldier there to rescue her and Lynch finally knew that she was going home.<sup>107</sup>

What ensued upon Lynch's rescue was a ferocious media frenzy. Lynch's story was reported again and again in newspapers, in magazines, on the Internet, and most importantly, it received wall-to-wall coverage on the twenty-four hour cable news channels. The problem was that the actual details of Lynch's capture and rescue were murky, but into the factual vacuum a familiar story was poured. If Rhonda Cornum had hoped that Americans were ready to view their female soldiers as just that, female soldiers, the Lynch narrative proved otherwise. Americans were bombarded with the image of the young blonde female soldier who seemed typecast for the leading role in the female Indian captivity narrative that the media appropriated to tell her story. The power of the packaged Lynch story was such that the fate of the other captives taken with her went virtually unnoticed.

Private First Class Jessica Lynch was taken captive on March 23, 2003, along with five other members of the 507<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company. As news reports went on about Lynch, very little coverage was given to the remaining five captives. One of those captives was Specialist Shoshanna Johnson, a single mother from Medina, Texas, who just happens to be African American. Johnson and the others were rescued nearly two weeks after Lynch had arrived home.

Garry Grundy of "The Record," an independent Harvard University newspaper, compared the two women's experience at home in a November 9, 2003, article titled "Three-Fifths of a Heroine." According to Grundy, Shoshanna Johnson had been shot in

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 131.

both her ankles during her capture. She was sent home to Texas and received a 30 percent disability package from the Army. At the same time Jessica Lynch received an 80 percent disability package along with a book and movie deal worth millions.<sup>108</sup> The National Urban League was outraged at the discrepancy and asked for an investigation into the benefits package, though Grundy reported that Johnson was not bitter about the fame of Lynch.

Jessica Lynch's biography hints at the ever present element of the "white womanhood in captivity" narrative most dramatically in a chapter titled "A Blonde Captive." The fact that Lynch was female and blonde did not escape the notice of news reporters. She was continually referred to as the pretty, 19-year-old, blonde girl, from Palestine, West Virginia, in many news stories and television reports.

White womanhood is clearly one of the essential elements of the captivity narrative. Not only does the white female body metaphorically represent national identity but the capture of white women illustrates the nation's vulnerability to outside forces. The women themselves have little to no say about their captivity, but some have been able to tell their own story without the pitfalls of biographer bias, or newshound embellishments. But even when they do speak for themselves, one has to ask whether every captive can get her story told. Publishing houses pay a great deal of attention to their consumers' preferences: is it an accident that the blonde soldier's story and not the African American's would attract a contract?

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<sup>108</sup> Garry Grundy. "Three-fifths of a Heroine." *The Record*. Thursday, November 6, 2003, [data-base online]: Available at <http://www.hlrecord.org/media/paper609/news/2003/11/06/Opinion/ThreeFifths.Of.A.Heroine-551069.shtml?norewrite&sourcedomain=www.hlrecord.org&page=2>, Accessed on September 6, 2005.

The traditional narrative providing the closest parallel to Lynch's story is that of Hannah Dustan. Both women were portrayed as the heroic saviors of American values and the American way of life. In Dustan's case, it was English values and the Puritan way of life, but the sentiment remains the same. The news media was quick to perceive that Jessica Lynch's capture represented another slap in the face of America by the Iraqi "others." With Lynch as the poster girl representing the nation, her narrative was initially told featuring Lynch as an action hero rather than the victim of war.

In at least the early reports of her capture, Lynch was viewed as acting heroically in her alleged standoff with Iraqi soldiers. Reports of her willingness to use her M-16 rifle were clearly viewed positively, indicating an acceptance of female violence and women's role as soldiers in at least some circumstances. On April 3, 2003, the *Washington Post* reported that Jessica Lynch "fought fiercely and shot several enemy soldiers after Iraqi forces ambushed the Army's 507<sup>th</sup> Ordnance Maintenance Company, firing her weapon until she ran out of ammunition."<sup>109</sup> The *Post* article cited U.S. official sources who were quoted saying that Lynch "was fighting to the death, she did not want to be taken alive."<sup>110</sup> These same sources revealed that Lynch suffered "multiple gunshot wounds" and was stabbed during her capture.

The same article, however, cautioned that such heroics were not confirmed. It also cited Pentagon sources as saying "they heard 'rumors' of Lynch's heroics but had no confirmation." Kansas Senator Pat Roberts was also quoted, saying "She just persevered.

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<sup>109</sup> Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb, "She Was Fighting to the Death: Details Emerging of W. Va. Soldiers Capture and Rescue," *Washington Post*, Thursday, April 3, 2003; Page A01, [Database on-line]; Available from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A14879-2003Apr2&notFound=true>, Accessed on July 24, 2005.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

It takes that and a tremendous faith that your country is going to come and get you.”<sup>111</sup>

The Roberts’ quote lent credence to the *Post* story, making it appear to be factual and Lynch capable of doing her duty and fighting to the end. By the end of the day, several news sources including *Fox News*, *MSNBC*, *CNN*, local news channels and newspapers across the country were retelling the *Washington Post* story.

The news reports depicting Lynch as a virtual action hero are not surprising when one looks at recent years changes in television, movies, video games and comic books in which women are presented in far more heroic roles. A *Newsweek* article written in 2000 by Lorraine Ali focused on the phenomenon of women action heroes in the media.

“Across the country female moviegoers no longer dream of being saved by Jean Claude Van Damme but of kicking and chopping the bad guys till they cry for mercy.”<sup>112</sup> A new barrage of female action films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix* showed their lead female characters as strong and able to defend themselves against the toughest male adversary. Following more than two decades of images of strong females who perform male roles, Americans were no longer shocked to see soldiers such as Jessica Lynch take on the role of warrior, indeed they may have expected it.

The stories illustrating the ability of both Dustan and Lynch to stand up and fight their enemy are also a part of a long history of sensationalism. Captive narratives, whether true biographies or fictional novels, showing women acting outside their normal roles create a level of shock or surprise among readers. The implication of improper treatment including forced marriages, rape, and sodomy further titillate the reader’s

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Lorraine Ali “Coming to a Gym Near You” *Newsweek*, December 11, 2000, 76.

imagination. This theme — the heroic woman in jeopardy—sells books and, in modern America, keeps viewers tuned in to their televisions.

The contradiction between heroism and victimization became more pronounced when Jessica Lynch's narrative is interpreted as a story of vulnerable white womanhood. Rather than focusing on the heroics of Lynch as a representation of American heroism, later reports focused on her female status, revealing her weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and highlighting the brutality of the "other" Iraqis.

One of the earliest television reports of Lynch's capture told viewers that Lynch was questioned and slapped in the face by a large Fedayeen security guard while lying in her hospital bed. The report came from an Iraqi lawyer named "Mohammed," first through the U.S. Marines and later through global news sources. Mohammed's wife worked in the hospital where Lynch was being held and the Iraqi lawyer witnessed the abuse on one of his visits.<sup>113</sup> The narrative's discussion of the good Iraqi suggests of the Indian captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. Her captivity was also reported by "Christianized" Indians who later were applauded in the narrative.

The brutality of the Iraqis presented in the Lynch narrative was revealed in a similar manner to that of the traditional Indian captivity narrative. The continual press coverage of Lynch's capture and suspected abuse fed into the stereotypes of Iraqi men. The American public already believed that the Iraqi Guard would willingly abuse American captives based on the atrocities the Guard had already committed against their

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<sup>113</sup> CBS News, "Iraqi Lawyer Dubbed POW's Hero" *CBS News*, April 4, 2003, [Database on-line]; Available from: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/04/29/iraqi/printable551522.shtml>, Accessed on July 24, 2005.



own people. The overwhelming coverage of the Lynch story served as a venue by which these stereotypes could be continued.

Later reports, including Lynch's biography, would indicate that more heinous atrocities were committed against her, and in essence, against America. The New York Daily News reported that "Jessica Lynch was brutally raped by her Iraqi captors."<sup>114</sup> The newspaper article relied heavily on the Lynch biography written by Rick Bragg, titled *I Am a Soldier Too*. In as much as earlier reports and medical records state that Lynch suffered from amnesia following the ambush and subsequent capture, what truly happened to Jessica Lynch may never be known. Bragg's account, although authorized by Lynch, could only speculate that Lynch had been anally raped either before or after her bones had been crushed.<sup>115</sup> Lynch's body armor and bloody uniform had been found later at a home near the ambush site. Bragg wrote that U.S. intelligence sources believed that Jessica Lynch had been taken there to be tortured.<sup>116</sup>

The Lynch biography was released in November 2003, amidst great controversy. Bragg's version of the events following Jessica Lynch's capture were upheld by new sources and media outlets despite an earlier report in May by the BBC news in Great Britain. That May 18<sup>th</sup> report quoted the Iraqi doctor who looked after Lynch. Dr. Harith a-Houssona said "I examined her; I saw she had a broken arm, a broken thigh and a dislocated ankle." He continued, "There was no sign of shooting, no bullet inside her body, no stab wound, only road traffic accident. They want to distort the picture. I don't

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<sup>114</sup> Paul D. Colford and Corky Siemaszko, "Fiends Raped Jessica" *New York Daily News*, Thursday, November 6, 2003, [Database on-line]; Available from: <http://www.nydailynews.com/front/v-pfriendly/story/134264p-119598c.html>, Accessed on July 24, 2005.

<sup>115</sup> Rick Bragg, 96.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

know why they think there is some benefit in saying she has a bullet injury.”<sup>117</sup> The contradictory reports by the BBC news and the fact that American news sources failed to discuss the possible mistakes in their earlier reports clearly suggests that once American news media had framed Lynch’s story as traditional female captivity narrative “facts” could not easily alter it.

The Fox News Channel reported on May 5, 2003, that Lynch suffered from amnesia as a result of her accident and injuries. The article quoted government sources stating that they were “concerned about Lynch’s mental and physical state, saying she can’t remember anything after the moment the 507<sup>th</sup> was ambushed nor can she remember anything about her days in captivity and the brutality U.S. military officials believe she endured.”<sup>118</sup> The report continued to suggest that Lynch suffered horrible things and was a witness to war crimes against American soldiers. *Fox News* indicated that Lynch had been beaten up badly and was in terrible pain. The article also alluded to sexual misconduct on the part of the Iraqi soldiers who captured Private Lynch. Reports of sexual assault and brutality by news sources led the American public to believe the worst of the Iraqi soldiers and perpetuated stereotypes already formed about Arab men and essentially all “others” during times of war.

The American government had learned from the controversy surrounding their duplicity involving the release of information concerning Specialist Rathburn-Nealy during the First Gulf War. During the rescue of Jessica Lynch, rather than conceal the

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<sup>117</sup> John Kampfner, “Saving Private Lynch Story ‘Flawed’,” *BBC News*, War Spin, May 18, 2003, 1915. [Database on-line]; Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/programmes/correspondent/3028585.stm>, Accessed on September 6, 2005.

<sup>118</sup> “Sources Say Jessica Lynch Has Amnesia”, *Fox News Channel* Monday, May 05, 2003. [Database on-line]; Available from <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,85936,00.html>, Accessed on September 6, 2005.

fact that Lynch was a captive, they chose to highlight the fact and make her narrative a propagandist battle cry for all American to get behind the war effort.

On the morning of April 2, 2003, correspondents had been rushed from their beds to CENTCOM in Doha. The big news was not the capture of Saddam Hussein, but rather the dramatic rescue of PFC Jessica Lynch. News services around the world broadcast the rescue mission as it had been filmed by military members during the rescue operation. Military officials gave details about Lynch's capture and where she had been held for eight days. They also claimed she had been stabbed and shot which was not true. "A military cameraman had shot footage of the rescue. It was a race against time for the video to be edited. The video presentation was ready a few hours after the first brief announcement. When it was shown, General Vincent Brooks, the U.S. spokesman in Doha, declared: "Some brave souls put their lives on the line to make this happen, loyal to a creed that they know that they'll never leave a fallen comrade."<sup>119</sup>

Weeks after the initial coverage of the rescue of Jessica Lynch, media officials began to question the sincerity and the manipulation behind the Pentagon's release of information. The full results of the incident are not yet available for review, but history should shed some light on the Pentagon's use of the Lynch rescue as propaganda supporting the war effort.

When comparing the narrative of Lynch to those of Rowlandson and Dustan it becomes obvious that American media outlets relied on the pervasive elements of the traditional female captivity narrative to tell Lynch's story. Lynch's own biography

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<sup>119</sup> John Kampfner. "The Truth about Jessica" *The Guardian*, Thursday, May 15, 2003. [Database on-line]; Available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Iraq/Story/0,2763,956255,00.html>, Accessed on November 23, 2005.

continued to use the formulaic plotline to tell the narrative suggesting that although American women have come a great distance in regard to their involvement in war, when it comes to stories about women soldiers in captivity, the traditional narrative will be very difficult to displace.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the pervasive elements of the Indian captivity narrative have endured across three centuries of American history. Despite the changes in women's roles during war in contemporary society, it would appear that military women captured and held as POWs are likely to hear their story told in the familiar plot lines first written by Mary Rowlandson. In addition, the captivity narrative still serves to mark the boundary between American culture and other, particularly non-white, nations. And, the captivity narrative still lends itself to its use as propaganda.

The continued power of the captivity narrative in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is especially problematic, however. As more women have assumed combat and combat-related roles in the modern American military, the (mostly unconscious) use of the captivity narrative to frame public understanding of their experiences represents a major distortion of the truth. It neither acknowledges the new roles open to women nor recognizes that women of color make up a large portion of the female military population.

American racial segregation created the all white nurses' captivity of World War II. Racial discrimination during the 1940s limited the number of African American nurses allowed to serve in the Philippines. Because of the restricted number of locations that African American nurses were allowed to serve, there were no African American nurses in the Philippines or on Guam to be taken captive. But the situation was quite different by 2003. The framing of Lynch's capture as a blonde woman's captivity narrative excluded women of color. Lynch's fellow captive Specialist Shoshanna

Johnson, failed to capture the American spotlight following the announcement of her captivity. Early television coverage showed Johnson along with the other captives from the 507<sup>th</sup> maintenance Company, but by the time they were rescued, two weeks after Lynch, the focus was on America's new "sweetheart."

The ambivalence regarding women's appropriate roles also continues to appear in the modern version of the captivity narrative. Once again, Lynch's story provides a telling example through the wildly different accounts of her capture. In the earliest account, Lynch was said to have heroically fired weapon until she ran out of ammunition. In later accounts, she is a completely vulnerable victim: injured, unconscious, sexually assaulted. That both versions cannot possibly be true is of less account than that they both were readily told without much attempt to determine actual facts. The question of her heroism versus her victimization, and cultural ambivalence about both, continues to live with Lynch herself as a lightning rod for bitter arguments about women in the military.

Finally, the female captivity narrative continues to be appropriated as propaganda. During the years between the first Gulf War and the second, Americans were inundated with stories of the barbarity of the Saddam Hussein regime. He was known to have used poisonous gas on the Kurdish nomads and to allow his henchmen to rape and brutalize the citizens of Iraq. When word arrived that Private First Class Jessica Lynch had been taken captive in Iraq, many thoughts turned to the obvious brutality of Hussein and the fear for Lynch's safety. Reports of Lynch's sexual abuse only confirmed American suspicions about the Iraqi military and their willingness to commit violence on American

prisoners of war. Her rescue highlighted the supposed differences between the “brutal” Iraqis and the nobility of the Americans willing to risk their lives to save a comrade.

The captivity narrative remains a component of the American selective tradition, a piece of how Americans explain themselves. As such, it is embedded in America’s national identity, and one suspects that as long as women are at risk of capture during war, the narratives itself will endure. Moreover, the narrative simplifies the options open to women. In an age in which women increasingly assert themselves, the narrative insists that women will always need to be rescued. Finally, the female captivity narrative continues to be useful in transforming the chaotic and violent reality of war into epic tales of “good versus evil,” epics in which Americans are heroic saviors and their enemies the savage “other.”

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