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The Search for Redemption

How Olaudah Equiano Captivates his Audience through his Interesting Captivity Narrative

Emily J. Nichols

Amidst a literary wave of the captivity narrative genre in early America, Olaudah Equiano writes and publishes his stirring autobiographical account *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, in 1791. He skillfully adapts his unique experiences as a captive and African slave of White people to fit the conventions of this hybrid American genre—a genre which tells the redemption story of those (typically White female heroines) taken captive by Native Americans. Essentially, he writes unfamiliar material in a familiar way. In doing so, he turns the captivity narrative genre on its head, providing a potent critique of the prejudice held against the “other”—a prejudice that is pervasive in the White colonist versus Native American dynamic. This further serves to undermine the theme of redemption for the captives that so many American and European readers expect as a result of a captivity narrative. Thus, Equiano provides an important account that assists his contemporary readers in navigating a new and more inclusive understanding of the captivity narrative genre. The captivity narrative genre is advantageous for Equiano’s

purposes because it is a familiar genre for early American and European audiences. His readers are well-versed in the Hannah Dustan and Mary Rowlandson captivity narratives, among others. In fact, these narratives dominate the literary scene from the late seventeenth century well into the nineteenth century. The Hannah Dustan narrative alone is examined and rewritten by multiple authors and Puritan scholars throughout the following centuries, from Cotton Mather in the late seventeenth century to Henry David Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century (Franklin 115–128). Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative is considered to be “the most famous account of [the] attacks” by the Native Americans against White colonists during King Philip’s War (Levine 267). Various members of the Puritan clergy, which possibly includes the distinguished Increase Mather, encouraged Rowlandson to write down her narrative in order to “find meaning for the colony in [her] experiences” (Levine 268). Clergymen would find a captivity narrative like that of Rowlandson to be inspiring and instructive for a congregation of Puritans faced with hardship. Rowlandson’s story is one of unwavering faith and meekness—two significant virtues in the Puritan religion. A century later, she served as a symbol for the Patriots during the American Revolution, depicted in an illustration with rifle in hand in defense of her home (268). Despite the radical shift in depiction, the result is the same. For seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Americans, this is an inspiring narrative. Whether the reader is a God-fearing Puritan or a Revolutionary Patriot, he or she is instantly connected to others in the early colonial community who have experienced hardship. Levine suggests that “part of the work’s appeal is its connecting an individual’s experience to a group identity” (268). These ideas of community and shared sentiment are especially prevalent during Equiano’s time, and the captivity narrative genre provides the perfect conduit for these ideas. Indeed, the captivity narrative is well-loved and well-read in America by the time Equiano enters the literary scene with his *Interesting Narrative*.

A cornerstone characteristic of the captivity narrative genre is the presence of contact zones. These are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 34). In the captivity narratives, the contact zones typically take the form of the New England wilderness frontier populated by both Native American tribes and White European

colonists. In these contact zones, the helpless White victim is taken captive by the savage Native American captor—the “other”—during a violent raid of her town. She witnesses her captors’ foreign rituals that differ significantly from her own Puritan practices; thus, the captive heavily relies upon the mercies of God and her own will to survive the horrific scenes before her. The captive eventually returns home after either escaping, leaving freely, or being ransomed by her family or town. Her return offers both physical and spiritual redemption; she physically reunites with her family in her home and teaches her community about God’s grace in saving her from the terrors of the pagan natives. In short, the liberated captive regains much of what she had lost in being taken, most importantly her freedom and a chance at a normal life.

This concept of redemption plays a crucial role in capturing the audiences of captivity narratives. Accounts of redemption and liberation after traumatic experiences evoke sentiment. The readers engaging in captivity narratives at this time join in a community of sentiment and sympathy—ideals that are widespread and valued during the Enlightenment. These people read captivity narratives, like that of Hannah Dustan and Mary Rowlandson, to feel and share the language of sympathy in regard to the innocent captives. Sharing these stories provides early American readers with a way to commiserate as a community over the hardships of the New England colonies.

Equiano effectively adapts his experiences as a black slave to the captivity narrative genre; it is possible that he is familiar with the genre characteristics and audience expectations previously mentioned. He uses these widely accepted features to his advantage, which allows him to turn the genre on its head and ultimately critique the important concept of redemption. In writing his own captivity narrative, Equiano assumes the role of the helpless captive in the hands of the brutal red-faced captors who terrorize their contact zone, the western coast of Africa. Thus, Equiano becomes the victim. He first establishes this role change by describing his captors. Just as Dustan and Rowlandson are taken captive by the Native Americans, often stereotypically referred to as “red-skins,” Equiano is taken captive by “white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair” (741). He further describes their foreign features in this way: “Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard), united to confirm to me in this belief” that “they were going to kill me” (740). In his first moments with the White men, Equiano focuses

on their unusual physical features—features that recall to mind the images of Native Americans in a typical New England captivity narrative. Equiano goes so far as to describe the horrible appearances of his captors. This ugliness naturally evokes fear and revulsion, thereby conveying Equiano's terror and uniting his audience in Enlightenment sympathy. He turns these White men into red-faced savages bent on destroying him, not unlike how the Native Americans are portrayed in the Dustan and Rowlandson narratives. In this sense, Equiano flips the typical captivity narrative around and creates a new "other"—a White "other" that previously played the role of helpless victim.

Equiano also draws on the foreign nature of the White captors to cast them in the role of "other." This foreignness creates feelings of fear and distrust, further rallying the audience around him as the victim. He capitalizes on the White men's qualities of magic—magic being the unfamiliar, inexplicable, and even frightening qualities of the things these White men do. This is evident in his comments concerning various parts of the slave ship. He says, "The White men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked, in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits . . . I expected they would sacrifice me" (742). Such talk of spells, magic, spirits, and human sacrifice echo that of the Dustan and Rowlandson narratives in regard to the Native Americans. Equiano draws upon powerful images and emotions as he substitutes the savage paganism that is so repulsive and terrifying to the white colonists with white magic. He places himself in a position similar to that of the White colonist captives by pointing out that the white men "were full of nothing but magical arts" and "made up of wonders" (744–45). Again, the captivity narrative is popular in part for its unifying effects over the American colonists; they can all relate to the fear of a group of Native Americans performing magic rituals at the expense of their captives, deep in the woods. Audiences bond over these shared experiences. Equiano generates similar feelings in his readers through his description of the captors, only now the captors take on the identity of savage White people. This is yet another way in which Equiano adapts the captivity narrative genre to his own personal narrative and undermines the white version of captivity.

Equiano continues to turn the genre on its head by recounting the relentless cruelty of his White captors, especially towards stereotypically weaker people. This cruelty is an important marker of the captivity narrative genre; it elicits strong emotional reactions of sympathy from the audience.

In response to the original seventeenth century narratives, the audience emotionally unites over Hannah Dustan's newborn infant who is bashed against a tree, and Mary Rowlandson's six-year-old daughter Sarah who dies of a wound inflicted by the natives. In Equiano's narrative, hundreds of African slaves are shoved down into the lower decks of the white men's ship and suffer horrible conditions there. He describes "the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable" (742). This is just one of many examples of suffering endured by Equiano and the other captives at the hands of the cruel whites. He goes on to say, "I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty" (741). The images of suffering and death of women and children in the slave ships recall similar images from the Dustan and Rowlandson narratives, as these women witnessed the death of their children and were separated from their families for a time. These images, of course, are familiar to Equiano's audience.

Equiano takes this a step further in his narrative as he discusses families being separated during the slave trade: "Surely, this is a refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery" (744). Suffering characters and separated families like these cause strong emotional reactions from the audience because they are typically seen as weaker and more susceptible, therefore rendering their fate all the more heart-wrenching. Equiano certainly follows this common pattern of suffering and separation in the genre. Though he is a male, he writes this part of his narrative from his memories as a young boy. He emphasizes the cruelty suffered by those of the physically weaker sex. This perspective underscores the cruelty of the captors against the weak and defenseless, creating yet another strong move in the narrative flip against the whites.

Using gender in this way to portray helplessness and innocence emphasizes the hypocrisy in the white narrative to pacify and Christianize the Native Americans. The female Dustan and Rowlandson figures evoke sympathy from their white audiences and therefore justify the colonial expansion system, including slavery. Wayne Franklin explains, "In New England, for instance, the majority of the captives (about two-thirds) were

male, whereas the bulk of the narratives (in about the same proportions) concerned females" (112). He goes on to say:

Gender, in other words, matters in these tales less for itself . . . than as a proxy for political disputes between European American and Native American cultures. The passive, innocent mother/captive may reinforce white values, but she more importantly serves to present the pacific pretensions of white society as a whole. By feminizing the very image of white society, she decoys attention away from the militaristic thrust of European culture into North America. (112)

The White narrative champions the pacific female figure in the captivity narrative genre because her suffering seems somehow worse than the harsh realities of cruelty experienced by the thousands of displaced Native Americans at the hands of the White colonists. Equiano inverts this White narrative by writing the black narrative in which the cruelty of the white men is repeatedly emphasized. He defeminizes the image of whiteness and exposes the hypocrisy of the slave trade. Black people taken from their native homes become the pacifistic victims in place of White women taken from their colonial homes. In Equiano's narrative, the political dispute shifts from Native American versus European American to African versus European American.

Finally, Equiano subverts the captivity narrative genre by examining the concept of redemption so characteristic of the genre and so emotionally loaded for an Enlightenment audience. For Dustan, Rowlandson, and other White captives, this redemption means the freedom to return home to their living family members after a few months of captivity and to carry on with life as they did before. This does not discount the horrors of losing children and other family members, as did Dustan and Rowlandson; it would be unfair and cruel to ignore their sufferings and the scars that remain from losing loved ones. Nevertheless, the fact remains that these White captives return home and experience some form of redemption.

This is not the case for Equiano and the African slave population at large. He and others like him spend years, even lifetimes, working as slaves in foreign countries far from home with no hope of returning. The generations that follow must adopt new homes, cultures, languages, and ways of life entirely separated from those of their parents and grandparents. Equiano saves for years to buy his freedom, only to then make a way for himself in

new lands. He never returns to Africa. He never sees his family again. He never experiences the redemption that is expected of a liberated captive in this genre. Unlike the experiences of the White colonist captive, there is no redemption in going home for the Black captive.

Equiano, therefore, is in a position to critique the idea of redemption in the captivity narrative. This is perhaps his most powerful move in speaking to an Enlightenment audience through the captivity narrative genre, and he does so at the perfect time. Christine Levecq explains that “the spread of the Enlightenment promoted humanist and liberal ideas such as tolerance and individual dignity. As a result, by the end of the century, European racial thought was profoundly unstable, ready to tilt in different directions depending on the context” (13). In London, where Equiano publishes his narrative in 1789, the wheels of abolition are already turning. America is slower on the uptake, but there still exist pockets of abolitionists in the Northern states at the time of Equiano’s publication. His audience is primarily ready to receive messages about human equality, especially through such powerful images as those of shackled African slaves aboard white trading ships. Indeed, by “incorporating the vocabulary and ideals of the Enlightenment—particularly the belief that sentiment linked all human beings and thus provided a basis for universal claims to human rights—Equiano makes a powerful case for the countless disenfranchised and exploited workers whose labor fueled the new mercantilism” (Levine 731–32). By employing all of the characteristics of the captivity narrative genre in his own narrative, he sends a clear message of the absence of redemption for many captives.

Equiano also anticipates potential attempts made by abolitionists to provide forms of redemption for blacks that are simply not feasible. One such attempt is the colonization movement that occurs later in the eighteen-thirties. This abolitionist movement supports plans to send African Americans back to Africa, where they can work and live in their ancestors’ continent. One abolitionist who advocates for this plan is Benjamin Coates, a Pennsylvania Quaker who “never wavered in his convictions that a new colony in West Africa, populated by black Americans, was the best strategy for ending slavery and giving African Americans a positive new start” (Lapsansky-Werner et al. 2). Though seemingly well-intentioned and sincere in its precepts, the colonization movement for African Americans does not account for those slaves who never called Africa home, nor for people like Equiano who were

taken as children. In his narrative, Equiano works to convey how completely impossible this would be. His descriptions of helpless and beaten slaves, forever stripped of their families and native ways of life, impress in the minds of readers the incredulity of Coate's suggestion. Even if Equiano managed to cross vast physical distances and return home, it never would be the same, for his sister had been taken and separated from him too (736). For captives like Dustan and Rowlandson, returning home does mean redemption because they still have homes and families to return to. They reside in captivity for a few weeks or months at a time within a few day's travel of their hometowns. Black slaves, on the other hand, are divided from their families. They live in captivity oceans away from their native lands for decades. By the time abolition comes around, African Americans have vastly different identities from those of their kinsmen who never left Africa. For displaced Africans or those born into slavery outside of Africa, redemption cannot come in the form of going back. It certainly never does for Equiano who, despite his many world travels as a free man later in life, never returns to Africa (732). This choice suggests that a physical return to his native land could never replace the true home and family from which he was taken.

All that can be done to provide redemption for the Black slave like Equiano is freedom from slavery, but even this is complicated. Americans during and after Equiano's time still have to reckon with the repercussions of slavery in all facets of American life, particularly in American literary works. In her discussion of American literature, Toni Morrison observes, "Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows" (6). The captivity narrative genre largely neglects to acknowledge the thousands of untold captivity stories experienced by people other than New England White colonists. The White captivity narrative is just one version of the genre in one small contact zone. Equiano's narrative brings to light the many unrecorded captivity narratives that occur in a myriad of contact zones throughout the Atlantic and the Americas during the slave trade. In this sense, just as Morrison points out, the Africanist presence is a critical part of developing the American captivity narrative. Rather than separate the White and Black captivity narratives in literary studies, as does the century of time between the Dustan/Rowlandson narratives and Equiano's narrative, both White

colonist and Black slave captivity narratives should be studied together in order to examine the genre in all of its aspects. Though there exists a vacancy of redemption at the end of the captivity narrative for Black slaves, captivity narratives like Equiano's that create deliberate inversions of the White captivity narrative help fill the vacancy of voice in the genre.

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