From Captive to Captor: Hannah Duston and the Indian Removal Act

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From Captive to Captor: Hannah Duston

and the Indian Removal Act

Olivia Cronquist

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

From Captive to Captor: Hannah Duston and the Indian Removal Act

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In 1697 Massachusetts settler Hannah Duston was taken captive by a group of Abenaki Indians. Duston and her companions escaped captivity by using a tomahawk to kill ten of her captors. Within her captivity narrative, Duston inhabits the role of captor rather than captive, providing a literary framework for reading and understanding the process of Indian Removal in the nineteenth century. Like white captives in the early colonial period, Native Americans in the nineteenth century faced pressure to assimilate, forced marches through unfamiliar territory, and acts of shocking violence like the Wounded Knee Massacre. During this time period, the United States government and army as well as white settlers took on the role of captors, keeping Indian tribes in captivity with these tactics. Understanding the period of Indian Removal as a type of captivity narrative increases our understanding of the shocking violence that accompanied the Indian Removal Policy. As a literary genre, captivity narratives created a national narrative of violence between white settlers and Indian tribes. The struggle for domination in the genre thus became the central struggle of the United States as white Americans embraced and advanced the fight against Native Americans for land and cultural supremacy in North America.

Keywords: early America, Hannah Duston, captivity narrative, captivity, Indian Removal, Wounded Knee, colonialism
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Introduction

In 1697 a group of Abenaki warriors led an attack on the small town of Haverhill, Massachusetts, burning homes and taking colonists captive. One of these captives was Hannah Duston, a forty-year-old woman recovering from recent childbirth. Smashing her infant’s head against a tree, the attackers led Duston and her midwife, Mary Neff, into the wilderness. Duston’s husband, Thomas, gathered up their remaining children and rode to safety, even as Hannah and Mary were taken from the burning village. Now captives, Duston and Mary were given to an Indian family consisting of, according to Cotton Mather1, “two stout men, three women, and seven children” (91).2 The captives, now joined by a young boy named Samuel Lennardson, who had been taken captive earlier in Worcester, were reportedly told that when they reached the Native settlement to which they were headed, they “must be stripped, and scourged, and run the gauntlet through the whole army of Indians” (Mather 91). Though it isn’t clear whether the threats were serious, during the night of April 30, Duston and her companions staged a daring escape. Using the tomahawk of her captors, Duston killed ten of the Abenaki family. Only one woman and a young boy managed to escape with their lives. Duston then scalped her victims and took the trophies back to Haverhill, where she and her companions received fifty pounds from the general court of Massachusetts as “a recompence of their action;

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1 As Duston never published her own account of her captivity, nearly all knowledge of her ordeal comes through Cotton Mather. Mather wrote Duston’s narrative, entitled “A Notable Exploit: Dux Faemina Facti,” and published it within his Magnalia Christi Americana. Small snippets of the story were recorded in the diaries of John Pike, John Marshall, and Samuel Sewall, but none contain as much detail as Mather’s account. In this article I assume Mather’s words to be an accurate portrayal of the events, as there is no extant record with which it can be compared. However, Duston’s missing voice poses a considerable challenge, as it is difficult to truly understand her motivations and the lasting personal impacts of her bloody escape.
2 One of the men in this Indian family was, as noted by Wayne Franklin, a Catholic convert who had once lived in Lancaster and worked as a servant of Reverend Joseph Rowlandson, husband to Mary Rowlandson. Rowlandson’s own captivity narrative is perhaps the best-known example of the genre.
besides which, they received many ‘presents of congratulation’ from their more private friends” (Mather 91).

As simply a white, female captive, Hannah Duston is not unique in American history. Gary L. Ebersole notes in Captured by Texts: Puritan to Post-Modern Images of Indian Captivity that the threat of being taken captive by a Native American tribe was quite commonplace, and simply came to be a natural part of life in America (5-6). Mary Rowlandson’s ever-popular narrative illustrates this idea, as she appears to have been dreading, if not completely expecting the raid on Lancaster. As she begins to describe the attack, she writes: “Now is the dreadful hour come, that I have often heard of (in time of war, as it was the case of others), but now mine eyes see it” (269). With the seemingly never-ending warfare between the English settlers and Native populations (including King Philip’s War, King William’s War, and Queen Anne’s War) it was more common than rare to hear of families and individuals who had been kidnapped by the enemy. But Duston’s actions during her time in captivity were not usual or expected. While most female captives like Mary Rowlandson exhibited traditional piety and submissiveness in their narratives, Duston’s story is marked with shocking violence.

Americans and scholars have long struggled to adequately understand and characterize Hannah Duston and her story of captivity and escape. Throughout the nineteenth-century, numerous American authors revisited Duston’s story, each providing a different interpretation of the narrative. To Nathaniel Hawthorne, Duston was a “raging tigress,” and “there was little safety for a redskin, when Hannah Duston’s blood was up” (126). Duston’s story was not one of bravery then, but a thinly veiled attempt to justify the rampant killing of Native Americans, as “Mather, like an old-hearted, pedantic bigot as he was, seems trebly to exult in the destruction of [them]” (125). Robert Arner argues that Hawthorne’s interpretation shows the narrative’s
complexity, as “Hannah, who appears at first as a good woman, becomes a hag by the end of the piece. Her antagonists, the Indians, who initially are pictured as bloodthirsty savages, Hawthorne humanizes until they become the victims” (21). John Greenleaf Whittier, on the other hand, had no problem interpreting Duston as the hero of the story. Whittier fills “The Mother’s Revenge” with descriptions of Duston’s bravery and compassion as well as the savagery and cruelty of her Native captors. Arner states that Whittier “wishe[d] to justify Hannah’s crucial transformation from tender-hearted woman to revengeful mother” by offering gory descriptions of her dead infant and implying the young Native boy escaped the slaughter not by chance, but because Duston compassionately let him go (20). In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Henry David Thoreau avoids casting Duston as either a hero or a villain. Instead, he attempts to understand Duston’s story in the light of transcendentalism, using her voyage home as a means to describe the picturesque Massachusetts wilderness, specifically mentioning the iced-over river, birch trees, and “primeval forest [stretching] away uninterrupted to Canada” (128).

These nineteenth-century perspectives illustrate Duston’s tenuous place in American history and culture as a paragon of American courage and individuality, a “bloody old hag,” (Hawthorne 126) or something in the middle. Revisiting Cotton Mather’s account of the narrative shows his own uneasiness with Duston’s actions. At one point, Mather seems to humanize Duston’s victims, referring to them as an “Indian family” and taking care to note that the group consisted not only of warriors, but women and children as well (91). Anthropologist Pauline Strong asserts that this humanization suggests that “Dustan’s violence may have remained unsettling” for Puritan readers, whose expectations for female captives were subverted (127). Perhaps, Strong supposes, “her violence against the Indian family was too similar to that directed against Dustan’s infant: Tomahawking, scalping, and dashing infants against trees fell
under the same sign of savagery” (127). Likewise, in “The Uses of Female Humiliation: Judea Capta, Hannah Dustan, and Hannah Swarton in the 1690s,” Teresa Toulouse argues that for Mather, who intended the narrative to “exhort the congregation to a ritual passivity,” dealing with Duston’s narrative “proved an extraordinarily difficult task” because of her inability to conform to the traditional captive’s role (85). A significant factor in her deviance from the norm was Duston’s “gender trespasses” (Carroll 51). Because she did not fit the mold of other female captives, Duston’s story became ripe for multiple interpretations from authors throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Far from the traditional female captive, Hannah Duston presented a significant challenge to early colonists’ understanding of Indian captivity.

However, the strangeness of Duston’s story can be better resolved by reading the narrative within both the captivity narrative genre and the course of Indian relations in the nineteenth-century United States. In the moment of her violent escape, Duston moves from captive to captor within the genre of the captivity narrative. Instead of following the traditional role of the English, female captive, she takes on the persona of the attacker. Cotton Mather, who was very familiar with the established format of the captivity narrative, describes Duston as a violent perpetrator rather than a passive victim during her escape. This change from captive to captor takes Duston outside the traditional captivity narrative, but the reversal of settlers as captives to settlers as captors fits well within the larger history of Native American oppression in what would become the United States. Duston’s actions, then, may be unexpected within the constraints of the captivity narrative genre, but are actually characteristic of the relationship between whites and Native Americans in the United States after the seventeenth century. While the concept of Native American captivity did not begin with Hannah Duston, her story represents the larger historical shift from Native Americans as captors to captives.
In her book *Captive Selves, Captivating Others: The Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives*, Pauline Turner Strong examines the practice of captivity in North America as “a middle ground of shared meanings and practices and as a hegemonic tradition” (7). Captivity, she argues, is not a uniquely Indian tradition, but a complex relationship and power struggle between the Captive Self and the Captivating Other. She notes that scholars have begun to “acknowledge the extent to which Europeans used captivity as a strategy of colonial domination,” thereby establishing the captivity narrative as transferrable from colonial captives to Native captives as well. Strong specifically states that she has limited her analysis to the pre-Revolutionary War era, examining how Indians and colonists took on the roles as both the Captive Self and the Captivating Other in the centuries before the formation of the United States as an independent nation. I apply the transferrable identities of captive and captor to the period of Indian Removal in the United States, when the established country was faced with the challenges of westward expansion on a continent already inhabited by Native populations. As the nineteenth century progressed, the roles of Captive Self and Captivating Other became less malleable, as Native Americans endured captivity on a continental scale. With the official policy of Indian Removal, the identities of captive and captor became institutionalized through legal precedent.

By examining the link between Hannah Duston’s narrative and the process of Indian removal, I intend to comment on how captivity narratives are read and used in the United States. The captivity narrative has long dominated how we understand the relationship between early colonists and Native Americans, with the former seen as primarily the victims rather than the aggressors. However, the process of Indian Removal is not traditionally thought to be a part of this narrative tradition. While traditional descriptors of white-Indian relations in the nineteenth
century – such as genocide or land-grab – are certainly helpful in understanding the period, describing Indian Removal as a type of captivity offers new insight. The complex relationships of captive and captor illustrate the interactions of white settlers, the American government, and Indian tribes across the western United States in the nineteenth century. As Native populations were forced out of their homes to march through unfamiliar territory, they took on the role of captive rather than captor, mimicking the format of Duston’s narrative. Reading both Duston’s story and the process of Indian removal in the context of the captivity narrative genre better allows readers to understand the roles played by not just Duston and the Abenaki in the late seventeenth century, but also by white settlers, the United States government, and Native Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. The captivity narrative genre created a larger narrative in the United States, one of a violent struggle for land and cultural supremacy against Native Americans. During the period of Indian Removal, white Americans embraced the genre’s violent tropes and overarching narrative of whites vs. Indians. A literary interpretation of Indian Removal thus helps to explain the ease with which the United States government and white settlers committed shocking acts of violence against Native Americans.

**Assimilation and the Captivity Narrative**

While Hannah Duston’s narrative fits the genre throughout the first half of the story, her violent escape subverts readers’ expectations and blurs the line between captive and captor, between Native and colonist. In most captivity narratives, white settlers would become gradually assimilated into the Native tribe. Richard Vanderbeets identifies three main modes of assimilation in traditional captivity narratives: the gauntlet ritual as an initiation into captivity, a “gradual accommodation to Indian practices and modes,” and “symbolically ‘becoming’ an Indian by ritualized adoption into the tribe” (554-558). The story of Mary Rowlandson illustrates
this process of integration into the tribe as she describes her reaction to the food eaten by her captors. She notes: “[by] the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and die before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savory to my taste” (277). Though not a full-fledged member of the tribe, Rowlandson gradually became accustomed to the food eaten by the Wampanoags, signaling her accommodation to their practices.

A more extreme example of assimilation is the story of captive Eunice Williams, taken by Abenaki and Kahnawake warriors from Deerfield in 1703. While her father and siblings were eventually returned to the settlement, Eunice became fully integrated into the Kahnawake settlement. In *The Unredeemed Captive*, John Demos describes the process, noting that Eunice stopped speaking English within two years of her captivity, married a member of the Mohawk tribe, and was given new names, both Catholic and Indian. As traditional captivity narratives helped early settlers distinguish themselves from what they characterized as the savagery of the Native tribes in New England, stories of captives becoming fully integrated into Indian society were both shocking and disturbing. Any positive influence of Indians on settlers was unacceptable to New England Puritans, who partly justified their presence in North America by claiming a missionary effort among the Native tribes. The idea that any white settler would

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3 Narratives of assimilated captives were popular during the colonial period, a time of sustained contact between whites and Native tribes. *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* tells the story of Mary Jemison who was taken by Seneca Indians in 1755 and remained with the tribe until her death in 1833. Though she told her story to colonial minister James E. Seaver in 1823, she chose to stay with the Seneca, apparently preferring her life in the tribe to her life in the colony. Some children who were taken captive and later released back to the colonial government had to be forcibly stopped from returning to their Native families. John McCullough, an English boy held by the Indians for over eight years had to be tied to a horse to prevent his escape back to the tribe. He was eventually successful and spent another year with his Indian family before he was carried back to the colony under strong guard (Axtell 62).

4 The Massachusetts Bay Colony Seal features a Native American man holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in another. Out of his mouth comes a speech bubble with the words “Come over and help us.” Cathy Rex states that the seal is characteristic of “Europeans’ production of cultural, historical, and political representations about the Indians of North America as ‘inferior,’ ahistorical, and elemental beings who were deserving of … and even pleading for,
prefer to live among the Indians undermined the Puritans’ idea of religious and racial supremacy. Hannah Duston’s story, which shows her involved in the type of violence traditionally seen as only committed by Indians, did not sit well with audiences.

Duston’s narrative rather shows a strong link between narratives of white and Native captivity. This link is first evident in Cotton Mather’s retelling of Duston’s story, in which readers can see strong similarities between the Abenakis’ attack on Haverhill and Duston’s attack on her Abenaki captors. The first notable detail is Duston’s choice of weapon. Mather’s account of Duston’s story specifically notes that she used the warriors’ own tomahawks to kill and scalp her victims. Wayne Franklin argues that “the hatchet is an implement of both revenge and transformation,” as Duston acts both against and like her captors (113). Duston’s use of the Indians’ weapon damaged the image of the traditional female captive and blurred the line between colonists and Indians. Likewise, her method of killing is strongly reminiscent of the attack on Haverhill. Mather writes that Duston and her companions “struck such home blows upon the heads of their sleeping oppressors, that e’er they could any of them struggle into any effectual resistance” (91). Striking their enemies on the head is the way most captivity narratives describe violence during Indian raids on white settlements. Mary Rowlandson frequently describes how she saw her family and neighbors “knocked on the head” and Mather’s account of Duston’s story says that her infant child was killed when a warrior “dash’d out [its] brains against a tree” (90). By killing the Indian children by striking them on the head with a tomahawk, Duston recreated the violence against her own child. She adopted the practices of her captors in an act of aggression and revenge against them.

the domination of Europe” (62-63). The seal is an enduring representation of the early settlers’ simplistic and devastatingly flawed perception of Natives as eager for European influence.
This kind of assimilation was repeated during the Indian Removal Policy as Indigenous tribes were forced to assimilate to white American culture. Just as colonial captives were gradually integrated into the tribes with which they were held (whether temporarily or permanently), Indians throughout the nineteenth century also adopted many aspects of white culture. This process was often entered into reluctantly or involuntarily by Indians, who did not want to lose their cultural identity but who were being quickly displaced and overrun by white settlers pressing west. The narratives of Native assimilation bear striking similarities to narratives of colonial captives, as both groups of captives experience a strong pressure to conform to the culture and practices of their captors.

One popular method of assimilation was the Indian boarding school system, which gained significant traction throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. These schools, which ranged throughout the western and mid-western regions of the United States, were constructed to indoctrinate Indian children with white culture and practices, separating them from their cultural heritage. The Carlisle Indian School, opened in 1879, was the most respected of these institutions. In an 1892 speech, the school’s founder Capt. Richard H. Pratt repeated the infamous sentiment from General Philip Sheridan that “the only good Indian is a dead one.” Pratt then described the school’s mission as: “kill the Indian [and] save the man” (260). These schools usually involved Indian students “learning in English-only classrooms, studying in campus industrial shops, and generally becoming Americans while ceasing to be Indians” (Gram 253). The experiences of popular Dakota-Sioux author Zitkala-Ša at an Indian boarding school exemplify these assimilation tactics. In her autobiographical narrative “The School Days of an Indian Girl,” Zitkala-Ša describes the systematic removal of her Indigenous culture in exchange for the Anglo-Christian ideals of the school’s employees. One of the first changes the children
experienced was a physical one, as they were given dresses and shoes in exchange for their own clothing and forced to have their hair cut short. Zitkala-Ša writes that she “lost [her] spirit” after losing her long braids and felt like “only one of many little animals driven by a herder” (91). To further distance them from their Native culture, students were banned from speaking their own language, and were forced to communicate only in English. Students found not using English were strongly punished.

This process of assimilation at Indian boarding schools closely mirrors the experiences of colonial captives who became integrated into Native tribes. The story of Eunice Williams bears particular resemblances to the experiences of Zitkala-Ša and hundreds of other Indian children like her. Eunice’s physical, religious, and ultimately linguistic transformation signaled her total immersion into Mohawk culture and full assimilation into the tribe. The gradual loss of their native languages was a particular sticking point for both women, and the amount they lost had a large impact on their assimilation. While Zitkala-Ša retained her knowledge of the Dakota-Sioux language and reconnected with her native culture as an adult, Eunice Williams slowly lost the ability to speak English at all and could communicate only with other members of the tribe. John Demos argues that “language was the pivot and symbol of her personal acculturation,” and her loss of English signaled a complete rejection of her former life and culture. In both the early American captivity narrative and the period of American Indian Removal, captors used assimilation to exert dominance over their captives.

Indian Removal and the Captivity Narrative

The captivity narrative genre, ubiquitous in the North American colonies and the United States through the nineteenth century, perpetuated ideas of imperialism and the inherent righteousness of white colonists. The basic structure of the genre was very familiar to the early
Puritans, as it draws extensively from the Bible. The stories of the children of Israel and their times of bondage under Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Roman rule had a profound influence on the New England Puritans, who saw themselves as the chosen people of God. The religious aspect of these narratives reinforced the white settlers’ justifications for claiming land across North America. Richard Slotkin writes that in the captivity narrative genre “only one relationship between white and Indian [was] conceivable – that of captive to captor, helpless good to active evil” (144). Using female captives as the symbol for the nascent collection of colonies emphasized the innocence and virtue of the European presence in New England. Wayne Franklin argues that by drawing particular attention to the innocent female captive, the New England settlers attempted to disguise their presence in North America as a peaceful and pious campaign rather than a “militaristic thrust of European culture into North America” (112). The struggle between settlers and Natives was more than a clash of cultures or religions. It was a fight for the white colonists’ sense of belonging and identity in the New World.

The nineteenth century policy of Indian Removal drew on these ideas of white settlers’ divine right to the North American continent. Beginning in the early years of the 1800s and fueled by hunger for more land, white settlers from the eastern United States began steadily moving into previously unsettled territories. This expansion opened more opportunities for contact and conflict with Native tribes throughout North America, some of which had not previously been affected by European colonialism in North America. By 1830, the pressure to expel Native Americans from valuable tracts of land across North America led to the passage of the Indian Removal Act. This law made it legal for the United States government to claim land inhabited by Native Americans by way of treaties. After their property was seized, tribes were moved to designated reservations across the country.
The main goal of the Indian Removal Policy was the forced relocation of Native tribes from their ancestral homelands to less-desirable tracts of land far removed from white settlers. This relocation very often resulted in forced marches across vast distances, causing the deaths of thousands of Indians from disease, exposure, and starvation. The most famous example of relocation was the Cherokee Trail of Tears, the forced march of Cherokee Indians to the Oklahoma territory. The actual process of removal and forced marches of the Cherokee and other Native American tribes is highly reflective of the captivity narrative itself, just reversed to cast the Americans as the perpetrators and the Native Americans as the victims. Like the Indian tribes of early America carried settlers from their homes and villages to journey across hostile territory before ending in a foreign settlement, the government of the United States forced the Native Americans of the mid-nineteenth-century to move or be moved. Indeed, the descriptions of the Trail of Tears and other forced Native American marches during the time period bear many similarities to the traditional captivity narrative. In *The Trail of Tears and Indian Removal*, Amy H. Sturgis notes that “not only did the Cherokees lose their ancestral home during this 1838-1839 campaign, but many also lost their lives. Traditional estimates suggest more than 4,000 of 15,000 Cherokees died during or as a result of removal; some recent recalculations suggest a higher death toll of approximately 8,000 out of 21,500” (2). One of the central horrors of the captivity narrative was the forced removal of the colonists from their home, as they were taken into wild Indian territory, which was commonly seen as a space for the devil. Likewise, women and children, along with able-bodied men, were often marched in harsh conditions with little sympathy or assistance, as shown in John William’s narrative, *The Redeemed Captive*, and John Demos’ book, *The Unredeemed Captive*. The same horrors inflicted on the colonists by the Native Americans during the colonial period were impressed upon the Indian tribes during the
period of Indian Removal. The traditional narrative flips, just as Hannah Duston shifts roles in her own experience.

**The Indian Massacre: Wounded Knee and Beyond**

The process of Indian Removal was purportedly meant to relocate Native tribes to new lands where they would not interact with white settlers. But many military and government leaders aimed instead for the complete extermination of Indians from the western United States. This directly led to numerous named and unacknowledged Indian massacres throughout the nineteenth century, culminating in the massacre of Wounded Knee. These devastating attacks on Indian villages and families have long been difficult for modern Americans to conceptualize, as they do not fit with the traditional American narrative. However, reading these events as reflections of the captivity narrative genre and its roles of captive and captor reveals the larger pattern of Native Americans largely inhabiting the captive’s role through the nineteenth century. Such massacres certainly have precedent in early New England and descriptions of the violence bear many similarities to popular captivity narratives of the early settlers. In this section I will outline the links between several Indian massacres – as described in Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* – and Hannah Duston’s captivity narrative.

The Sand Creek Massacre was an attack by the United States military, led by Col. John Chivington, on a village of Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians. Cheyenne leader Black Kettle had flown an American and white flag over the village in an attempt to convince the coming soldiers that they were only looking for peace. Despite this, Col. Chivington ordered the troops to fire on the village, killing men, women, and children. In Brown’s narration, he cites the eyewitness account of Robert Bent. Bent describes how a group of women shielded their children, begging for mercy. The soldiers murdered the women and children, following Chivington’s argument that
nits make lice” (88-89). In his analysis of the build-up to the Sand Creek Massacre, Christopher Rein notes that the killing of women and children was in direct violation of Col. Chivington’s orders from Major General Samuel R. Curtis. This open disobedience, Rein supposes, may have led to Chivington’s quick resignation from his post in an effort to avoid a court-martial (224).

After the slaughter, the American soldiers scalped their victims and mutilated their bodies, taking body parts as trophies. Christopher Rein writes that scalps were the most popular trophies taken from the massacre. He also quotes the Rocky Mountain News from a few days after the event, which reported: “Cheyenne scalps are getting as thick here as toads in Egypt. Everybody has got one and is anxious to get another to send east” (228). This event has troubling similarities with Hannah Duston’s narrative. Duston, too, killed an entire Indian family and took their scalps to be sold to the Massachusetts government. In both narratives, the captors take scalps as their captives, substituting living captives for pieces of bodies. But the scalps perform the same function, as they work as both trophies to prove the captor’s physical dominance and means of monetary gain. Just as eastern Indian tribes ransomed captive settlers back to the British colonies or even to French settlers in Canada, both Duston and the soldiers at Sand Creek sent their scalps off to be traded for cash.

In 1868, General Winfield Scott Hancock ordered Cheyenne chiefs Tall Bull, Gray Beard, Bull Bear, and Roman Nose to surrender their people to his forces. When the chiefs and the rest of the tribe failed to return to the village, Hancock ordered the destruction of the Cheyenne village. Brown writes:

In a methodical manner the lodges and their contents were inventoried, and then everything was burned – 251 tepees, 962 buffalo robes, 436 saddles, hundreds of parfleeches, lariats, mats, and articles for cooking, eating, and living. The soldiers
destroyed everything these Indians owned except the ponies they were riding and the
blankets and clothing on their backs. (152)

This description of the destruction of the Cheyenne village mirrors the descriptions of house
burnings in many captivity narratives. Cotton Mather writes that during the attack on Haverhill
the Abenaki warriors burned about half a dozen houses (90). Mary Rowlandson’s narrative
specifically notes that the residents of Lancaster were first alerted to the attack when they heard
the noise of guns and saw that neighboring homes were on fire (269). The destruction of colonial
homes was particularly devastating, as the settlers had built the village from scratch and were
now left with little to no personal possessions. Likewise, Brown specifically notes that the
Cheyenne were left with nothing but the clothes on their backs after the destruction of their
village. In both cases, the aggressors purposefully targeted their victims’ homes in a conscious
effort to destabilize their physical presence in the space. In early New England, Native tribes
wished to topple the nascent European settlements. In the nineteenth century, the United States
military, armed with the Indian Removal Act aimed to exterminate the Indian presence in
western North America.

One of the last major episodes in the process of Indian Removal, the Wounded Knee
Massacre, can also be understood as a type of captivity narrative. The massacre of Wounded
Knee was an instance of nearly unfathomable violence in American history, as hundreds of
Native American men, women, and children were killed by soldiers in the United States Army
over the controversial Ghost Dance practiced by some tribes at the time. The rhetoric of the
event bears a strong resemblance to that of the traditional captivity narrative, especially Hannah
Duston’s. In the beginning of most stories of captivity, the Native American tribe is described as
descending on the colonial settlement with little to no provocation, as the warriors kill colonists
with little regard for age, gender, or disability. In Hannah Duston’s narrative, her newborn child is taken from her arms and murdered right before her eyes, as is a common motif in the genre. When examining the firsthand account of Frank B. Zahn to the Wounded Knee Massacre, it is easy to see the similarities. He writes that during the slaughter:

   Stark terror gleamed in the eyes of frightened Indian women as they ran breathlessly away from the gunfire. A large group of women and children ran up a small ravine. Most of them took time to strap their small babies upon their backs. Mrs. Young Bear, still living on the Pine Ridge reservation, adjusted her three year old baby upon her back and darted out of her tipi. Her baby was instantly killed (Zahn).

Just like Hannah Duston and other female captives, the Native American women in Zahn’s narration of Wounded Knee are startled by the violence, attempting to flee in terror but finding death instead.

Conclusion

   At first glance, the figure of Hannah Duston perplexes most readers. She evades categories like model Puritan woman, paragon of female empowerment, and white colonizer. Her dual persona as both captive and captor places Duston’s narrative in a unique position to help us understand the complex relations between white settlers and American Indians from the colonial period through the nineteenth century.

   The policy of Indian Removal is not a simple narrative. Like Duston’s story, it defies easy characterization because of the nuanced interactions between white settlers, the United States government, and a multiplicity of Indian tribes across the western United States. White-Indian relations during this period are often described as being genocidal, a violent process of American imperialism fueled by the idea of Manifest Destiny. While this framework has played
an essential role in the U.S.’s reckoning with its violent past, it does not fully account for the
unstable relationships between the victims and perpetrators. Indian Removal was a type of
captivity and recognizing it as such changes the way we understand nineteenth century U.S.
history. When we think about Indian Removal within the framework of the captivity narrative,
specifically the narrative of Hannah Duston, we can better understand the identities and roles
inhabited by those involved. Particularly, the framework of the captivity narrative allows modern
Americans to understand how white Americans in the nineteenth century allowed themselves to
commit such violence.

When reading accounts of cruel assimilation practices, forced marches, and Indian
massacres, we must ask ourselves how ordinary people came to approve of and participate in
such horrifying events. The settlers, government officials, and military members who were
involved with these practices were not inherently more prone to violence than the average
person. Indeed, Christopher Rein argues that the Sand Creek Massacre – and by extension, other
Indian marches and massacres – “cannot be explained as the typical actions of men whose lives
were ‘nasty, brutish, and short.’ Instead, they comprised a cohort of ‘ordinary men,’ who
somehow became capable of inflicting brutal atrocities on their fellow residents in the territory”
(223). However, we can better understand these actions by seeing these men in the role of captor.
Within the captivity narrative, the captor uses violence to subdue the captive and prove his or her
dominance over the latter. The nineteenth century saw white Americans accepting the role of
captor on a national scale, allowing for the practice of Indian Removal to become a government
policy. Playing out the captivity narrative on such a vast stage solidified nineteenth century white
Americans’ identities as captors and emboldened these individuals to commit extreme acts of
violence. The role of captor allowed white settlers, government officials, and military members
to perpetuate atrocities against their captives, the Indian populations of the western United States. Their shocking acts of violence felt formulaic because they were expected within the genre with which nineteenth century Americans were familiar. The captivity narrative genre thus functioned not only as a literary genre, but as a cultural force which helped to establish a larger narrative of white settlers vs. Indians in America. Readers of captivity narratives in the nineteenth century created a new national narrative – one of violent struggle between white Americans and Native Americans. According to this new narrative, the two groups were in competition for land, resources, and cultural supremacy. So, the policy of Indian Removal was simply a logical step within that violent competition. The United States government and army as well as white settlers used this national narrative to justify their violence, seeing it as a natural progression of the cultural conflict played out in the captivity narrative genre.

Indian tribes in the United States during the nineteenth century were subject to similar pressures as English captives during the colonial period, just on a much larger scale. The effects of these pressures have left an indelible mark on Native populations, a mark with which modern residents of the United States continue to struggle. But Indigenous culture did not end with the practice of Indian Removal. Instead, it persisted through long periods of captivity and continues to live in our country today. Like Hannah Duston and other colonial captives, the United States’ Indigenous populations were not exterminated, but survived through great courage and persistence. But, also similar to Duston and her fellow captives, the effects of this period of captivity linger beyond the end of the violence. American Indian populations still suffer from the lasting impacts of the Indian Removal Act. But viewing these groups as survivors of captivity rather than simply victims of racial violence and oppression sheds new light on the history and future of their cultures.
A genre which both influenced and was influenced by the culture of early America and the United States, the captivity narrative offers a framework through which one of the darkest periods of United States history can be better understood. The roles of captive and captor were not sequestered to the pages of the colonial captivity narrative, but also characterize the relationship between Indian tribes, white settlers, and the United States government during the nineteenth century. To see the practice of Indian Removal through the conventions of the captivity narrative shines a light on the nearly unfathomable violence of white Americans and the lasting impact of the practice on the Indigenous populations of the United States. As the United States continues to reckon with its history of racial and cultural violence, we can look to our literary genres for insight and understanding.
Works Cited


