

Captivity Narratives and the Positions of Female Captives in *Soldier Blue* and *Dances with Wolves*

From the beginning of European exploration and settlement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the end of the nineteenth century, Native American captivity was very much a historical reality for countless explorers and settlers living on the edge of the American frontier. It also touched the imaginations and fears of virtually everyone for whom it was a possibility. Conservative estimates place the number of captives taken by Indians in the tens of thousands. In Emma Coleman's study and record, more than 750 New England captives were taken during the French and Indian Wars. Between 1675 and 1763, according to Alden Vaughan and Daniel Richter's document, there were 1,641 New England settlers captured by Native Americans. It was the fact that the white settlers were carried away by the Indians during Van Winckle's day.

Native Americans took captives for revenge and replace tribal numbers diminished by war and disease. Firstly, Native Americans were angry at Europeans who stole their lands and massacred them in wars. Sometimes, adult male captives were tortured and killed in Native American ritualistic ceremonies to avenge the death of Indian warriors. However, there were undoubtedly instances of female captives being tortured and killed, and one issue that remains beneath the surface of most narratives is whether such captives were sexually violated by the Native Americans. Except in the most examples of narratives whose value as anti-Indian propaganda was being exploited by the press, most female captives either remained silent about the sexual abuse they may have experienced or commented that Native American captors respected their chastity. The eighteenth century Quaker captive Elizabeth Hanson maintains that the Native Americans were "very civil toward their captive women, not offering any incivility"

(Hanson, 1728). Secondly, the captives, replacing tribal numbers who were died, were treated very well when they were adopted by Native Americans. The adopted captives grew to love their Native American families and opposed leaving them even when given the opportunity to do so. Cadwallader Colden wrote in 1747 about the captives who refused to leave the Indians, “No Arguments, no Intreaties, nor Tears of their friends and relationships, could persuade many of them that were by the Caressings of their relationships persuaded to come home”. The captives had a strong affection for Indian relations, and many of them chose to live with the Indians in their rest lives.

However, whether in autobiography or romance-adventure fiction, Native American captivity often has been regarded as a fate worse than death, and white people have been generally seen as “vulnerable but brave pioneers beset by wild savages” **Error! Reference source not found..** Many narratives of Native American captivity appear in New England between 1682 and 1707**Error! Reference source not found..** From seventeenth-century to twentieth-century, the captivity narratives were often based less on fact than on speculation, such as the *True Relation of the Gentleman of Elvas* (Evora, 1557), Richard Hakluyt’s *Virginia Richly Valued* (London, 1609), and Captain John Smith’s *Generally Historie of Virginia* (1642). The narratives in these works projected stereotypes that Native Americans are brutish beasts or innocent exotics, and they attack the white in a typical method: “During the before-dawn hours...they would massacre men, old women, and children too small to travel, take the young women and the older children captive, and be well on their way back to their villages before neighbors could organize for pursuit” **Error! Reference source not found..**

It is significant that scholars share a central captivity image of a victimized woman in a genre of captivity literature. The publications contain the first of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative

in 1682 to the last one—John William’s narrative in 1707 **Error! Reference source not found..** Cotton Mather established this central image of captivity, and he developed further to yoke together the two italicized words “captives” and “women” **Error! Reference source not found..** Even though women were not the only image in captivity narratives, they were the dominant ones. Dawn Lander Gherman’s “From Parlor to Tepee: The White Squaw on the American Frontier” states a point that the traditional image of the white frontier woman was that of “a victim, a vindictive, and castrating avenger of her own victimization” (Gherman, vii). These narratives were strongly supported and widely published. The images of women’s victimization concentrate on abuse or torture, slavery, and food deprivation. The captured women who tried to escape were scalped by the Indians. The Native Americans laid burning wood splinters on women’s bodies and cut off their ears and fingers. A popular literary form that developed from stories about women’s captivity among Indians helped the dominant male colonials to address and to negotiate profound information in “their own sense of personal and cultural identity” (Toulouse, 2006). The captivity narrative can be seen as a sort of condensed version of the myths a culture generates from its frontier regions and thus provides a particularly rich site from which to examine the process of mythology **Error! Reference source not found..**

Furthermore, the captivity myth played a significant role through Hollywood filmmaking and also has been represented in some American films, such as *Little Big Man*, *Dances with Wolves*, *The Searchers*, *Soldier Blue*, and *Taxi Driver*. In films dealing with Native Americans, ranging from silent movies in the 1900s to the high budget films in the 1990s, female characters also often serve as sacrificing roles that are delicate and fragile. Female characters share a common experience that they are captured and raped, sometimes murdered by the savage Native Americans. Worse, women were forced to undergo extraordinary physical and spiritual trials in

the wilderness. To stress victimization, females often mentioned in connection with rape were adolescents and mothers still of childbearing age (either pregnant and/or nursing at time of capture). The image of “outraged virginity” **Error! Reference source not found.** was a powerful propagandist tool which made the audience to believe that the Native Americans were destroying the future mothers of a new generation of whites. In the white popular imagination, family life was disrupted, perhaps damaged. Even though after women were rescued by the white men and returned to the white culture, they were isolated from the community they used to belong to and were not accepted. However, there are two special female characters, which are captured by Native Americans and are not fragile or delicate. They were not raped or murdered. They partially undermine and provide counter point to the captivity myth in Hollywood filmmaking, present filmmakers’ sympathetic response to Native Americans, and promote women’s power. They are Cresta Marybelle Lee in *Soldier Blue* and Stand with a Fist in *Dances with Wolves*.

In this paper, I will discuss presentations of the two special female characters, Cresta Marybelle Lee and Stand with a Fist, who portray different images of female captives through their personal experiences with Indians, and their undeniable impacts on male characters’ changing attitudes to Native Americans. The paper will be examined in the following approach. At the beginning, two special female roles partially undermine the misrepresentations of Native American men through their captivity experiences. Also, their experiences with Native Americans establish the real image of Native American men. Furthermore, the paper examines Cresta’s and Stand with a Fist’s powerful influence on Gant and Dunbar’s changing attitudes towards Indians.

*Soldier Blue* was directed by Ralph Nelson in 1970. The director sets a melodrama in the American West in the 1870s. A paymaster's detachment of the U.S cavalry is attacked by Indians seeking gold, and two white survivors, Honus Gant (Peter Strauss) and Cresta (Candice Bergen), trek through the desert and reach the cavalry's main camp. Another film, *Dances with Wolves* was directed by Kevin Costner in 1990. It is a film adaptation of the 1988 book by Michael Black. Both the film and the book tell the story that Lieutenant John Dunbar (Kevin Costner) leads Union troops to a victory during the Civil War. He soon gets a position on the western frontier, befriends a group of Lakota Indians, and marries Stand with a Fist (Mary McDonnell).

At the beginning, the captivity narrative is the most prevalent and direct vehicle for the general audience to understand the images of Native American males through film representation. The fragile and vulnerable female roles bolster the savage images of Indian males, producing a sacrificing female role for the general audience. For instance, John Ford's *The Searcher* portrays Martha, a white girl, who is taken by Native Americans and murdered. Because the filmmaker wants to leave space for the audience to imagine, Martha's death is not shown in the film. Martha's death both signifies and constructs the unthinkable horror and supposed violation of her murder. The cinematic presentations of an innocent girl's death raise the negative images of Indian males and automatically justify white men's murder of and vengeance towards Native Americans. The captivity narrative indicates that women who are captured by Native Americans may suffer "a fate worse than death"**Error! Reference source not found.**, such as being abused, tortured or enslaved. However, Cresta and Stand with a Fist's captured experiences partially overturn the captivity narrative through their relationships and communications with the Cheyenne and Lakota Indians.

Cresta is a white lady who was captured by the Cheyenne for three years. Cresta almost fully supports the Cheyenne, and she has strong empathy and understanding towards them. During her three-year capture, Cresta was alive and made friends with the Cheyenne due to their friendly attitudes and immense affection. What she witnessed during her capture was that white men invaded the Cheyenne's tribes, occupied their lands, and murdered Indian women and children. As Cresta says to Gant, "Did you ever see little boys and girls stuck on the long knives? Stuck and dying? I have." Through Cresta's language and her experience, the audience learns who is really being murdered, and who are justified.

The male Cheyenne characters appear twice in *Soldier Blue* and have conversations with Cresta. This first appearance of the Cheyenne does not emphasize a specific Cheyenne male; instead it is the Cheyenne attack on a paymaster's escort killing everyone except Honus Gant and Cresta. During Cresta and Gant's journey to the cavalry's main camp, Cresta explores her knowledge of living and surviving in the crucial outside natural environment, which is taught to her by the Cheyenne. Cresta feels that the Cheyenne are the people who helped her back to the "civilization". The second time of the Cheyenne's appearance is at the end of the film, and the audience can see them welcoming Cresta back with loving, open arms, warm smiles, and laughter. Meanwhile, a featured Cheyenne male character appears--Spotted Wolf, the leader of the raid against the troopers. He welcomes Cresta back and asks where the love token is that he had given her. When she admits she gave it to Soldier Blue (Gant), he understands and wishes her well. The audience can see that Spotted Wolf is civilized, and more important he refers to the goodness and humanity of the Native American.

Furthermore, *Stand with a Fist in Dances with Wolves* not only portrays a different side of the experience of female captives through her life with the Lakota, but also she presents

female ability and powers through her reacceptance by the white culture. *Stand with a Fist* was born of white settlers and was originally called Christine, but she lost her parents as a result of a dispute with Pawnee warriors. She had escaped a Pawnee raiding party, and she was rescued and raised by the Lakota tribe as an adopted daughter of Kicking Bird. She does not suffer pains when she lives there, but she grows up under the care of Kicking Bird and his wife, learning the language and lifestyle of the Lakota. Moreover, in the films, the female captives are often portrayed as isolated from the community and as rarely accepted by the white culture after they were rescued. However, *Stand with a Fist* explores her agency through her marriage with Dunbar. Their marriage challenged the family value in white culture which is based on women's physical, sexual, and spiritual exploitation. According to the marriage value in white culture, *Stand with a Fist* is a widow whose first husband died during a raid on the Utes, and she should not get married again, because she needs to keep her chastity and purity. She needs to be a "virgin" after her husband died, no matter whether her husband is a Lakota or a white man. In addition, women captives were "torn from a cohesive family unit" **Error! Reference source not found.** *Stand with a Fist*, captured by the Lakota for several years, does not have any connection with the white culture, and she is almost isolated from the white civilizations. In white culture value, she needs to remain being a widow and living on the marginal society. Yet, her marriage with Dunbar represents her transcendence to the myth and her ability to form a new family unit and to be reaccepted by the white culture.

Both *Cresta* and *Stand with a Fist* in the films do not play sacrificing roles, but instead, they are as powerful and strong as male characters in the film presentations. In contrast with the presentations of white captivity in other films who were sometimes raped and mistreated, *Cresta* and *Stand with a Fist* walk out of American civilization joining in the fight on the Indian side,

trying to protect women and children for the Cheyenne or the Lakota. In the context of the captivity stories, two females overturn the captivity myth and also open up communication between white males and Native Americans. Their experiences represent that the American Indian is neither “noble savage” nor “ignoble savage”, but they help to prove that “the Indians are very civil towards their captive women, not suffering any incivility by any indecent carriage” (Drake, 1844, p.125).

In *Soldier Blue*, the audience can see Gant’s changing attitudes towards the Cheyenne from two scenes. One reason for Gant’s changing comes from his sympathy to the Cheyenne which was result of his experiences; on the other hand, the relationship with Cresta had essential influence. Initially, after Cresta and Gant survived the massacre in which the Cheyenne murdered American soldiers, he was upset by the death of his colleagues, and he did not believe what Cresta was saying and asserted that she was lying. Cresta says angrily and ironically to Gant:

“Good brave lads. Coming out here to kill themselves a real live Injun. Putting up their forts in a country they’ve got no claim to. So what the hell do you expect the Indians to do? Sit back on their butts while the army takes over their land?”

Cresta’s words lead Gant to think about the justice of the Cheyenne murder. In another scene, the fight between the troop and the Cheyenne has stopped. Gant limps past the laughing troopers holding a dead Cheyenne child, and runs to Iverson, the cavalry colonel, repeatedly asking “Why?” Gant’s question is also the basic substance of the whole film. By following the camera placement, the audience can see “the bodies lying across the ground to a crying baby, a weeping wife, three older children in awkward positions of death and a naked Cheyenne girl wandering

through the smoke moaning and bleeding from the mouth **Error! Reference source not found.**”. Cresta influences Gant by telling him her real experience and making him realize the facts that the Cheyenne attempt to protect women and children in the tribe, and they use guns to fight as their only hope of survival. But the American military troops are trying to occupy Native American lands and plunder natural resources.

Furthermore, Stand with a Fist acts as a bridge between Dunbar and Kicking Bird, and their marriage is a signal that Dunbar completely integrates with Kicking Bird’s tribe community. She helps Dunbar become involved in the Lakota community, and she provides translation information for Kicking Bird. The audience can see both Dunbar and Kicking Bird’s frustrations after their first communication, because they don’t understand each other’s language. Since Kicking Bird attempts to find out how many white soldiers are coming to his tribe, he asks Stand with a Fist to translate for him and Dunbar. Initially, she starts speaking broken English, but later, her English is improved during their conversations. The language learning process between each other becomes an extended courtship and sexual attraction which is filled with cultural curiosity. When Dunbar and Stand with a Fist embrace near a stream, the audience can see the cattail pollen fills around them, which symbolizes germination of their love between each other and also a consciousness among white American who have accepted and embraced the Indians (Castillo, 1991). The storytelling in *Dances with Wolves* is based on Dunbar’s changing attitudes towards the Lakota and his love and need to acculturate to the Lakota. He knows nothing about the Lakota and has confusion with the people in the tribe. Earlier in the film, Dunbar and Wind in His Hair (a Lakota warrior) met each other. Wind in His Hair charges on horseback directly toward Dunbar and stops only feet from him. Dunbar faints at that time. Later in the film, Dunbar is given an Indian name, Dances with Wolves, by Kicking Bird, and he has a

strong wish to embrace the Lakota land physically and culture spiritually. He learns to speak Lakota, wears the traditional costumes, and hunts the buffalos.

The positions of female captive physically and psychologically undermine the captive stereotypes as represented in *Soldier Blue* and *Dances with Wolves*, such as suffering abuse or torture, slavery, and food deprivation, and also they construct a real image of Native Americans. The audiences see the female captives are not fragile/ delicate or need to be rescued; also they observe the humanity and civilization from Native Americans.

*Soldier Blue* and *Dances with Wolves* present sympathy to Native Americans, draw the audience's attention to Indian cultures and heritages, and prove the captivity myth was meant to express white culture's anxieties and people's fear of threats from other cultures and races. *Soldier Blue* sets a new mark in cinematic violence, as a result of its graphic scenes of Cheyenne women and children being slaughtered **Error! Reference source not found.** The final massacre sequence suggests the mood of anti-war and pro-Indian sentiment, and it is like a horrible realistic spurt of blood: a young Indian boy, the son of the chief, is shot in the head; the decapitation of the woman; the attempted rape; and the subsequent moment when the soldier brings his knife to the Indian woman's breast, apparently to cut it off. Director Ralph Nelson used extremely violent scenes to depict the miserable experience and suffering of the Cheyenne. In addition, through Cresta's narration and experience, and Gant--a soldier-- changing perspectives to Cheyenne, *Soldier Blue* partially subverts the captivity myth. The filmmakers in *Dances with Wolves* attempt to depict, through purely cinematic terms, Native Americans in a more positive and less dehumanizing image. As Castillo writes, filmmakers' aspects of the picture were "sentiment, the humanity, not the politics". The scenes of Kicking Bird's confusing

and concerning facial expressions ring warmly familiar to the audience, which tells them humanity in a purely cinematic terms.

Both books and movies are the primary medium of the public entertainment; the captivity films display the same “semiotic richness and ideological complexity as their literary forbears” **Error! Reference source not found.** Marubbio describes film as “a social narrative and political inspired works of art that presents the society’s fears, desires, politics, conflicts, and structures of power” (*Killing Indian Maiden Image: Images of Native Americans Women in Films*, 2006). In the context of the captivity narrative tradition, reading the captivity narratives and films together highlights the ongoing attention of Native American reception in American culture.

Whether in films or literature works, every captivity narrative includes certain elements of “plot, setting, and character in dynamic, politically significant interaction” **Error! Reference source not found.** These elements are based on the historical events of Euro-American settlement of and aggressive western movement across the continent, fighting the native inhabitants along the way. Most obviously, captivity narrative features white people as the main characters, depicted as self-sufficient, industrious, yet radically isolated and therefore vulnerable citizens of a just society. All captivity narratives are by definition recounted from the perspective of whites for the white audience, no matter if the characters are portrayed sympathetically or unsympathetically. The opposing characters in captivity narratives are “Indians,” a culturally alien, non-white native population. People supported captivity narrative suggests the positions could be turned toward “local conflicts and competitions (Indian or colonial) and toward international imperial challenges (English and French)” **Error! Reference source not found.** Furthermore, all contemporary endeavors to interpret Indian history have the dual potential of

possibly hurting or helping contemporary Indians. Filmmakers who deal with Native Americans can use cinema as a tool to generate sympathy, concerns and demands. Additionally, they can adapt the narrative stories from literature, portraying visual images for the audience. However, the true reform of Native American treatments, including social, economic and political fortunes, could not be achieved only through Hollywood efforts.

## Reference

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