

National Anxieties and Negotiating Difference in American Barbary Captivity Narratives

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Abstract

The essay examines the accounts of personal experiences of those Americans who came into contact with the Berbers along the North African coast in the decades after the proclamation of American independence. The national anxieties and personal reflections arising from the encounter by Americans with a religiously and culturally complex, distant society on the southern Mediterranean shore are explored. Most American captivity narratives reveal a complex relation to the construction of American identity, where the Orient becomes a zone of contact in which themes related to selfhood and nationhood are constantly negotiated and reconstructed.

Keywords: Barbary Captivity; American Orientalism; Muslim Orient.

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1 Introduction

As a work of literary and cultural criticism, Edward Said's study *Orientalism* still constitutes one of the most foundational texts in post-colonial studies with his argument on how "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')." ¹ Almost forty years later, Said's thesis still preoccupies academics, while both supporters as well as opponents of his argument attempt to identify whether a binary model based on stereotypical depictions of the East actually enabled Western civilization to portray itself as civilized, moral and progressive as opposed to an irrational and primitive Orient. However, since Said's focus was nineteenth and early twentieth-century European colonialism, his discussion of what he considers to be a polar distinction between East and West tends to ignore the fact that both Europe's and America's initial contact with the Orient involved complex, and in many cases, "disorienting" experiences. ² In his work, which focuses on European writing, Daniel Vitkus argues against the use of primordial polarities and he notes that Said's framework cannot account "for the mobility, interactivity and variety of identity positions that emerge in texts about cross-cultural encounters" in the Mediterranean Orient. ³ Indeed from the sixteenth century onwards, these cross-cultural encounters in the Mediterranean were anything but indications of two "self-contained" worlds, especially as more Westerners found themselves present in the Barbary States.

The term "Barbary States" was used from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century to describe the middle and western coastal regions of North Africa (what is now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) and constituted one of the primary spaces of Europe's transnational encounters with the Muslim Orient. This region however also encompassed one of the greatest threats for European merchant ships, since Barbary pirates actively roamed the Mediterranean Sea searching for targets, which included not only cargo but also individuals who could be apprehended, sold and used as slaves until ransomed by their respective countries. More specifically, it is estimated that from the sixteenth until the nineteenth century, more than one million Europeans were captured by pirates and sold as slaves. ⁴ However, this amount is highly exaggerated, as slavery in the Barbary States did not represent a permanent condition. Most of these individuals were captured solely for the purpose of exacting ransom and using the slaves for labour until their redemption. Furthermore, as Paul Baepler reminds us, "these imperfect numbers ... do not include those who after their capture willingly converted to Islam and remained in their adopted country. Nor do the estimates include convicts who were not deemed worthy of ransom, the poor, and those kidnapped and sold by their own countrymen." ⁵

Even more perplexing, these numbers do not include individuals who willingly migrated to the specific region in an attempt to improve both their financial and social conditions. As other literary scholars of the period note, by the end of the 1620s, "there were more Britons in North Africa than in North America, as men were drawn to the Barbary States in search of work, livelihood and settlement," ⁶ while by the end of the seventeenth century, "as many as two thirds of the Algerian corsair *reis* captains ... were Christian renegades who had served in the professional armies of France, England or the United Netherlands." ⁷ Therefore, early encounters with the Muslim Orient were marked more by a series of contradictions and ambivalences than any strong feelings of national or Western superi-

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 43–44.
2. Kenneth Parker, *Early Modern Tales of Orient: A Critical Anthology*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 28.
3. Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 11.
4. See Robert C. Davis, *Christian Slaves, Muslim Masters: White Slavery in the Mediterranean, the Barbary Coast and Italy, 1500–1800*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3–26.
5. Paul Baepler, "The Barbary Captivity Narrative in American Culture," *Early American Literature*, 39, 2 (2004), 219.
6. Nabil Matar, "Introduction: England and Mediterranean Captivity, 1577–1704" in Daniel Vitkus (ed.). *Piracy, Slavery, and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 2.
7. Paul Baepler, *White Slaves, African Masters: An Anthology of American Barbary Captivity Narratives*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42.

ority. Even more importantly, the “Old” World of the Barbary States is presented as more appealing to many Europeans than the “New” World across the Atlantic which was yet to be fully explored and colonized.

Although this contradictory attitude is highlighted in the writings of European captives in the Muslim Orient, the capture of American ships from 1784 onwards also introduced the American nation to a Mediterranean which did not easily comply with a West—East or Occident—Orient binary model. During the period from 1785 to 1815, about 700 Americans were held captive as North African slaves. These Barbary captives produced more than 100 editions of 40 full length narratives,⁸ thus establishing the field for an expanding market of readers. Furthermore, as American subjects had just released themselves from British yoke, their captivity became a new allegory for the nation which was still in the process of forming a collective identity. In the American public’s imagination, the body of the American captive signified the body of an entire nation and with narratives such as these, the American public could start envisioning itself anew. Interestingly enough, this was the first time that the self-invention of an American identity also moved beyond national boundaries, with Americans envisioning an active presence in the Mediterranean, which constituted an important sphere of mercantilist trading for both European as well as American forces.

Following their European predecessors, American Barbary captivity narratives strive to maintain binary divisions such as captive—captor, Christian—Muslim or Self—Other. However, what they actually expose is their own ambivalence and anxiety about how to maintain as well as negotiate these differences. Finding themselves captive or commodities to be sold in Barbary, American sailors encountered firsthand a Mediterranean which did not easily comply to a binary model of West vs East or Occident vs Orient. In reality, this world consisted of an “intermixing of peoples, races, and religions”⁹ that included Muslims, Jews, Catholic priests (who sometimes also attempted to convert them), renegades and converts, but also Christians who had willingly integrated themselves within the Barbary States’ socio-economic system while retaining their own religious affiliations. In this respect, the fluid Mediterranean and the Barbary States in particular embodied “contact zones,” areas which Mary Louise Pratt has defined as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”¹⁰

2 American Captivity and the Fear of Conversion

This attempt to redefine captivity on an individual as well as a national level, was further problematized by the figure of the convert, a subject who, as Daniel Vitkus has poignantly pointed out, embodied cultural flexibility and mobility, but also the potential to “contaminate” other individuals and in effect, entire nations.¹¹ References to American converts are scarce, and even when cited, are employed as indications—or warnings—that adherence to Christianity is the path which ultimately leads to the liberation of the American captives. Sailor Robert Adams, who was detained in slavery from 1810 to 1814 after his ship was wrecked on the western coast of Africa, describes his two companions, Williams and Davison, as renouncing their religion in order to put an end to their sufferings under Moorish brutality.¹² Three days later, a letter from the British consul was received, proclaiming that Christian slaves would be released within a month. Adams notes that “Davidson heard the letter read apparently without emotion, but Williams became so agitated, that he let it drop out of his hands, and burst into a flood of tears.”¹³ Without any hope of redemption as they had renounced their faith, Adams’ com-

8. Charles Hansford Adams (ed.), *The Narrative of Robert Adams: A Sailor, who was wrecked on the Western Coast of Africa, in the Year 1810 ... A Critical Edition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xlv.

9. Matar, “Introduction,” 5.

10. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

11. Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 22.

12. Adams, *The Narrative of Robert Adams*, 63.

13. Ibid.

panions could only surrender themselves to their fate, knowing they would never be able to return to their homeland.

Fictional narratives also transcribe anxiety over conversion, though at times such references are used primarily to address issues at home. In Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, the protagonist, Updike Underhill, meets with a Mullah who is also a convert in order to discuss the Mahometan religion. As Updike tries to defend Christianity by saying that it is a religion disseminated in peace as opposed to Islam, the Mullah exposes the naiveté of such arguments by contending that as opposed to the Christian church, Muslims never forced others to adopt their faith. Furthermore, he directly attacks Western Christians and Americans as hypocrites because they baptize Africans and yet continue using them as slaves.¹⁴ After five days of conversing with the Mullah, Updike fails to rationally support his beliefs and arguments. Thus, instead of recognizing any veracity to the Mullah's words, he finds refuge in his status as a slave and admits that he chooses to resume his slave's attire, seeking "safety in [his] former servitude."¹⁵ The ironic image of slavery as a refuge is highly fitting as Royal Tyler employs this episode in order to contest African slavery in the United States. Addressing a nation which sought to represent liberty and democracy as its core elements, Tyler provides his own personal commentary on liberal hypocrisy, as democracy and equality seem to apply only to white subjects and not to African slaves at home. As Jacob Rama Berman also explains, Barbary captivity represents an uncanny experience where "American white slaves saw in the various cultural groups they encountered not absolute difference from themselves but moments of uncomfortable cultural recognition."¹⁶

3 Social Mobility in Barbary: The Case of James Leander Cathcart

For some American captives, adaptation, or an adjustment to their new environment, could provide an alternative to the more dramatic imperatives of conversion and integration. Such an adjustment usually took the form of actively participating in the country's economic development, just like African-American slavery had become a key component in the United States' economic advancement during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Yet as opposed to African-American enslavement, this participation in the natives' economic system bore the additional advantage of translating itself into personal advancement for the captives as well. Indeed, especially during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the early modern Mediterranean constituted such a multicultural as well as multi-religious environment that both Christians and Jews could practice their religious duty under the Ottoman Empire's *dhimmi* system without fear of persecution. Furthermore, Christian slaves were considered equal under the law and could demand legal protection as well as obtain property as long as they paid tribute and acknowledged Muslim rule. Robert Allison also notes that in cities such as Tripoli, the two most important officials after the Bashaw were either Christian immigrants or renegades who had willingly converted to Islam.¹⁷ Therefore individuals could rise to prominence depending on their skills rather than their religious or ethnic affiliations and could even hold positions of influence and authority.

As social mobility, instead of religious conversion, allowed some individuals to find the means of climbing the social ladder, one of the most notable figures of the era to embody this flexibility—as well as anxiety over his potential conversion—is James Leander Cathcart. A midshipman on board the schooner *Maria* of Boston, Cathcart was captured in 1785 and spent eleven years in captivity in Algiers. During that period, from the position of palace gardener, he managed to become a coffeegie and clerk to the Marine department, was subsequently made a clerk to the Bagnio Galera, and eventually reached the highest position available to a Christian captive, that of chief Christian secretary of the Dey of Algiers. But his successes did not end with this position. Despite the fact that he managed to

14. Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive: or the Life and Adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill* (1797), (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 134–135.

15. Ibid.

16. Jacob Rama Berman, *American Arabesque: Arabs, Islam, and the 19th-Century Imaginary*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 5.

17. Robert J. Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776–1815*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 118.

procure his freedom in 1796 with the Treaty of Algiers, he returned to the Barbary Coast two years later and was appointed Consul General to Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli in 1802. Paradoxically, Cathcart's precarious status as a slave marked the beginning of his political and financial advancement both within the nation as well as abroad.

For the most part, Cathcart's narrative seems to articulate an individual's experience that represents an entire nation's struggle for liberation and self-definition. Taken captive only two years after the end of the American Revolution, he prides himself in rejecting public subscription to Great Britain, instead preferring to remain a slave "in the service of America."¹⁸ He also reveals a proto-expansionist vision of American influence which does not only entail liberation of captives as well as restoring them back to their country, but also their actual commercial engagement with the Barbary States, marked by "seeing our flag displayed in Africa" just like their European predecessors.¹⁹ Even when he describes the city of Algiers, he superimposes the early colonization history of the Americas onto the Mediterranean region, noting that "the country except in their gardens and plantations, which were all walled in, resembling *the first settlements in America*, and which produced all the fruits of Barbary in abundance, was entirely uncultivated."²⁰ By comparing the city of Algiers with early American settlements, Cathcart not only transforms Algerians to Native American "savages" but also constructs a new frontier in the American imagination which, like its previous imaginary predecessor, entails a thrust towards expansion, this time on a global scale.

Personal interests and ambitions are constantly undermined in this narrative, while the editor E.D. Daniels attributes Cathcart's actions to a national duty for social advancement. As Daniels notes, "an indomitable spirit of patriotism enabled him to rise from abject slavery to become Christian clerk to the Dey of Algiers, being the medium to approach the Dey when the Ambassadors could not gain an audience."²¹ Indeed Cathcart also attempts to divert the reader's attention from the personal benefits he has gained during his eleven years in Algiers and instead maintains that his social mobility was the only means through which he could assist fellow captives, as well as the entire nation, during peace negotiations. However, despite his insistence on being a devout Christian and a patriot, this is not the same sentiment shared by any of Cathcart's cohabitants, or even his compatriots. On the one hand, the Dey considers him a man "senza feda" (without faith) as his allegiances fluctuate according to his personal interests. On the other hand, whereas Cathcart considers his eventual position as vital for the US government's 1796 peace treaty with Algiers, he is often met with hostility by American representatives such as Joseph Donaldson who consider him a traitor to the American flag. More specifically, while acting as a mediator between Algiers and the United States, Cathcart maintains that Donaldson is "jealous and mistrustful and has not magnanimity of soul sufficient to be able to comprehend that it is even possible for a man to run the risk of his life, without having any other motive than the good of his country and the self-applause of an approving conscience."²² At that moment he seems to completely dismiss his own personal motives for accumulating wealth and status or that his patriotic sentiments are questioned due to his position as confidant to the Dey of Algiers.

Whereas he constantly evokes God as placing him in a position of assisting fellow captives and that they would "certainly have been worse off"²³ had it been otherwise, it is no wonder that Cathcart's compatriots scorn him and avoid interacting with him. During these eleven years, the narrator learns to speak and read Arabic, obtains ownership of three taverns, charges rent to fellow American slaves staying in his room and even maintains servants, just like the Muslim despots he describes. In this respect, Cathcart's self-definition seems to waver as his adaptation to his new environment actually imitates or embodies the practices of the Muslim captors that he claims to despise. This imitation begins even before he reaches Algiers when, on board the captured ship, he admits that he begins establishing communication with his captors, first by standing at the helm of the ship and then by

18. James Leander Cathcart, (1788) *The Captives, Eleven Years a Prisoner in Algiers*, (La Porte: Herald Print, 1899), 153.

19. Ibid, 156.

20. Italics mine, Ibid, 87.

21. Ibid, Preface.

22. Ibid, 194.

23. Ibid, 138.

learning to smoke a pipe “by the kindness of the ship’s steward, who gave me a pipe and tobacco and whom I lived to repay.”²⁴ Thus, his actual experiences constantly come into conflict with his argument of having truly suffered to the same extent as his compatriots. Even when he claims that he was a victim of circumstances himself and that he was “destitute of friends to console [him] in time of affliction,”²⁵ Cathcart chooses this seclusion by accepting an invitation from the Dey’s chief clerk to stay in his apartments during the captives’ arrival on shore. Although he never addresses the reasons behind this invitation, an invitation which is not justified by his former status as midshipman or his current position as palace gardener, Cathcart notes throughout his narrative that he often bribes the Algerians in order to achieve specific goals and desires. It is not difficult therefore to assume that such bribes were conducted from his very arrival in Algiers as a means of ameliorating his condition as a slave.

Cathcart’s adaptation also runs the risk of reaching religious adaptation or actual conversion. Throughout the narrative, the author emphasizes his superior knowledge and how he constantly engages in arguments with both renegades as well as with the Portuguese and Spanish priests who are trying to convince him to convert. His principal conflict, of course, is with the Muslims to whom he arrogantly notes that “it would be as easy to charm [him] into a good Mussulman as to convert that metal in the crucible to pure gold.”²⁶ But in one of the most alarming scenes of his narrative—which he justifies by noting that he was intoxicated and saddened due to his country’s inability to liberate the captives—he attempts to prove his intellectual superiority to the Muslims, only to end up almost converting when he recites the Muslim creed of faith in both English and Arabic. As the Muslims who are present start shouting “Allah! Allah! Allah! this Christian is a Mahomedan, or the son of some renegade who pretended to turn Christian to serve his private purposes,”²⁷ Cathcart realizes his blunder and once again resorts to bribing people such as the Hadji in order to avoid actual conversion. As simple imitation almost results in religious apostasy, Cathcart’s narrative reveals that the negotiation of difference is complicated by the subject’s engagement with an already multicultural Mediterranean Orient and that binary racial and religious divisions are destabilized due to the captives’ own ambivalence about how to negotiate these differences.

4 Class Distinctions and National Solidarity

Other captives found the means of offering their services while residing in the Barbary States, and thus avoided both the pressure of converting to Islam as well as any of the relevant hardships which were common to most ordinary captives. In one of the most devastating seizures of an American ship, the frigate *Philadelphia* was captured along with its crew of 307 U.S. sailors when it ran onto a reef near Tripoli harbor in October 1803. Among the captives was one of the frigate’s officials, Dr. Jonathan Cowdery, a surgeon whose account was published in 1806 and represents the earliest account after the first Barbary War (1801–1805). Another reason that Cowdery’s account became highly popular was because the ship *Philadelphia* was subsequently burned in a daring operation by the U.S. Marines so as not to be used by the enemy. However, once again, what Cowdery’s account also indicates is the captives’ inability to effectively negotiate a national American identity, which constitutes the exact opposite of the Mediterranean Orient’s values and practices.

Trying to maintain stereotypical depictions of Muslims as portrayed in earlier accounts, Cowdery describes his initial encounter with his captors in what can only be defined as a scene of absolute madness and irrational violence. As he notes, the Tripolitans not only engage in capturing the Americans but, for some inexplicable reason, also fall “to cutting and slashing their own men ... cut [ting] off the

24. Ibid, 8.

25. Ibid, 143.

26. Ibid, 30.

27. Ibid, 147.

hands of some, and it is believed several were killed.”²⁸ Images such as these were common in earlier European Barbary captivity narratives and reinforced the image of the Other as an irrational and bloodthirsty savage. Yet this incident does not agree with the doctor’s subsequent comment concerning one of the Tripolitans who—again without any reason—offers him his friendship and, taking him by the hand, escorts him on board one of the boats. This act of kindness from a captor seems highly illogical when compared to the previous scene, but it demonstrates how elements of Muslim violence and cruelty were inserted in captivity accounts in order to establish a polar distinction between the United States and the Muslim Orient. Even more ironically, the doctor notes that he has a servant of his own, but is not allowed to take him, thus implicitly admitting from the very beginning of his narrative that slavery is not only traced to Barbary, but is also an American practice. In this respect, the vision of a nation whose focus is liberty and democracy completely disintegrates, while American practices seem to be identical, rather than oppositional, to the Barbary States’ capture of slaves.

In addition to the initial scenes of irrational violence which seem utterly disconnected from the rest of his narrative, there are various oscillations and silences in the doctor’s account which indicate the anxiety over superiority and alterity that most of the captives experience. Cowdery notes that one of the American sailors turns traitor, providing important information to their captors, while another converts to Islam. However, the doctor never actually condemns the aforementioned converts and seems more in conflict with himself regarding his alliances. These silences become more prominent in the manner with which he describes his visits to his sick countrymen as opposed to his patients at the palace. When discussing the American captives at the Bagnios, he only notes the decline in their physical and mental condition and that they “complained of their hard usage, in being compelled to lie on the cold damp ground, to eat bad bread, to work hard, and to be bastinadoed by their drivers.”²⁹ Even when one of the men attempts suicide by cutting his throat, no personal thoughts or emotions are expressed, and the doctor only notes that the captive survived. In one of the most striking oscillations, he comments on the palace gardens which host a variety of trees, “loaded with oranges, lemons and limes”³⁰ and then abruptly notes that two American sailors passed away without commenting on the manner in which they died, nor does he offer any thoughts or sympathy for his fellow Americans. In this respect, his comment is completely disconnected to the previous scene of abundance and prosperity. Although such comments may be considered the doctor’s attempt to provide an objective overview of his experiences during his captivity, there is a sharp discrepancy between these events and the manner with which he describes his visits to the Turkish officials. As he notes, he is always received in a cordial manner by his patients at the palace and he is “treated with as much respect as could be expected or desired from a foe, who held us as prisoners of war.”³¹ Thus, he not only draws a distinction in the manner with which he describes these experiences, but also recognizes that the motivation behind these captures is not to procure any slaves, but rather constitutes a necessary evil in the existing war between the two nations.

Cowdery’s experiences throughout his account seem more like the narrative of an inconvenienced gentleman rather than the experiences of an unfortunate captive. Even from the officers’ arrival on shore, they are escorted to the palace where they dine “in the European style”³² and are given dry clothes before being presented to the Bashaw. The minister of exterior relations offers them his friendship and promises to return as many of the officials’ clothing and items as he possibly can, thus indicating the different treatment that higher-class captives experienced as opposed to common sailors. Indeed, as the ship’s surgeon, Cowdery’s medical skills worked to his advantage as he was called upon on numerous occasions to offer his expert knowledge and restore various high-ranking Tripoli officials back to health, including the Bashaw himself and his son. More importantly, as other captives languished in the Bagnios, Cowdery describes himself strolling in the palace gardens, eating

28. Jonathan Cowdery, *American Captives in Tripoli, Or, Dr. Cowdery's Journal in Miniature*, (Boston: Belcher & Armstrong, 1806), 5.

29. *Ibid.*, 10.

30. *Ibid.*, 12.

31. *Ibid.*, 15.

32. *Ibid.*, 7.

pomegranates and oranges, visiting his patients at the palace, playing chess with the crown prince and even sightseeing, when he visited the triumphal arch which was built during the time of the Romans.

As both he and other American officials are housed, fed and even invited by the Bashaw to attend Bayram during the festivities, it becomes evident how class distinctions supersede any notion of national solidarity, and that the experience of captivity was not an identical experience for all American subjects. The only time that Cowdery performed any act which could be deemed patriotic is when he used a dull knife to amputate the fingers of an injured mameluke. Although he notes that this is conducted after the burning of the *Philadelphia* and the accomplishment of his "brave countryman," he also reveals his own selfish reasons for performing this task. As he explains, he acted in this manner "in hopes of losing my credit as a surgeon"³³ rather than having to treat additional Turks as patients. Thus, his own personal welfare becomes more important than participating in the American cause of liberating the captives or inflicting pain on his enemies.

Even when Cowdery attempts to downgrade the power of the Ottoman empire, by noting that the Bashaw welcomes them while seated "on his little throne,"³⁴ the narrative constantly betrays instances when Cowdery feels closer to the Bashaw than to his compatriots. He admits that the Bashaw is a handsome man and later on, that he is a caring and affectionate father who is much affected when Cowdery informs him of the serious condition of his son's health. Furthermore, the stereotypical depiction of the Muslim despot as a political tyrant is completely dissolved as Cowdery notes that the Bashaw forbids the Turks from using any violence against the prisoners following a petition signed by the American slaves which informed him of their condition. Although he later allows violence to be used in an attempt to speed up the peace negotiations with the American government, Cowdery notes that the Bashaw eventually retracts his decision as the slaves refuse to work and even offers them bread and oil. Quite ironically, the only time that Cowdery uses the word "oppressive," which he only employs twice in his narrative, is when he describes the Syroc wind which originates in the Sahara Desert. Thus he not only rejects this characterization in regards to the Bashaw, but also implicitly reveals his own sympathy towards the Tripolitan ruler.

It is interesting to note that even though Cowdery portrays Turkish officials in a favorable manner, class distinctions also prevail when these descriptions are compared to his comments regarding the common natives whom he actually equates to Native American Indians. In this respect, he notes that several back country inhabitants, just like the country inhabitants he was accustomed to at home, wander around "almost naked, half starved, and without discipline ... shaking their rusty muskets over their heads."³⁵ Furthermore, he makes this correlation in a more direct manner by arguing that marriages in Tripoli are considered official by women running through the city's streets, "making a most hideous yelling, and frequently clapping their hands to their mouths, similar to the American Indians in their *pow wows*."³⁶ These descriptions denote the doctor's conviction that American troops can easily defeat the disarrayed natives, thus expanding the nation's influence abroad. However they also draw attention to the fact that during these transnational encounters with the Islamic Orient, national anxieties and the forging of a national identity are further complicated by issues related not only to social class and status but also to the presence of these "Others" within the nation itself.

5 Responding to the Nation from Barbary

While captives such as Cathcart and Cowdery found means of alleviating their sufferings, such opportunities were not available to most common American sailors. Just like Royal Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, narratives written by actual captives were also employed in order to address the American nation's own hypocrisy and exclusionary character when it came to the notion of democracy. In this respect, William Ray, a common sailor who was also taken captive along with Jonathan Cowdery from the

33. Ibid, 17.

34. Ibid, 7.

35. Ibid, 19.

36. Ibid, 33.

Philadelphia frigate, uses excerpts from the doctor's account in order to expose the exaggerated details employed in the said narrative and to address what he recognizes as America's class favoritism both within as well as outside the nation. In his journal, published in 1808, he notes that seeking a refuge "under the shadows of the American Eagle's wings"³⁷ is not necessarily a blessing for many Americans since this shadow can function in either a protective or a threatening mode. This exposition becomes one of the main themes in Ray's account and in this rewriting of the captives' experiences, what Ray actually achieves is a Bakhtinian "heteroglossia" which ultimately undermines or rather, destabilizes the power of dominant discourses.

From the narrative's very beginning, Ray explains that he publishes his journal for two main reasons: first, and here it becomes evident that he is referring to Cowdery's journal, because he believes that "no one has given an accurate, full and circumstantial detail, of our capture and sufferings while under the domination of those predatory miscreants and ferocious barbarians."³⁸ Secondly, Ray wishes to emphasize American and Islamic instances of identification and explains in his narrative that "petty despotism is not confined alone to Barbary's execrated and piratical shores; but that base and oppressive treatment may be experienced from officers of the American [navy] ... punishing men for frivolous faults or errors, with the austerity of a West-Indian slave-driver, and inhumanity of a Tripolitan or Algerine."³⁹ As men are flogged and tortured for any trivial reason that the officers can conjure, their treatment on board the American ship does not differ from the bastinadoes they endure in the hands of their Muslim captors. Thus, Ray directly critiques American values as a mockery since in practice, the American nation constitutes anything but a democracy. As he notes, "if the ground of national honor and national defence cannot be maintained but by such flagrant violations of justice, of liberty, of humanity, and of the rights of man, freedom is a jest, and our constitution a mere burlesque on her name."⁴⁰

Ray's attack against Cowdery's journal becomes the primary means with which he challenges official authority, and he achieves this by focusing on both instances where the doctor exaggerates details in his account as well as on the various silences and omissions which are not addressed by the doctor. As opposed to the initial episode of excessive violence that Cowdery describes during the ship's capture, Ray argues that the whole scene is fabricated and that other captives can also testify to this fact. As he explains, "for my part I never saw any hands amputated, nor do I believe there were any lives lost; for myself and a hundred others were in the ship much longer than the Doctor, and none of us ever saw or heard of this carnage amongst themselves."⁴¹ Furthermore, in one of his most jabbing comments, Ray ridicules Cowdery's exaggerated description of trying to cure a 116-year-old man of deafness. Whereas this incident seems like a minor detail in the doctor's account, Ray focuses on this event to note that "we do not know which to doubt most—the Doctor's veracity or the Turk's credulity."⁴² In this respect, Ray emphasizes the importance of details such as these which are left unquestioned and draws the reading public's attention to the fact that official accounts do not necessarily constitute accurate representations of reality.

Even more, whereas for the American reading public, Barbary captivity narratives provided the means of representing as well as imagining a collective identity against this new transatlantic enemy, Ray rejects this presumption since the captives' experiences were anything but unifying or identical. Whereas officials such as Cowdery dined and slept under the hospitality of the Bashaw, common sailors such as Ray were conducted to the dungeons where their remaining clothes were removed in exchange for old rags. Being left hungry for twenty-six hours, he addresses this gap in the doctor's account and argues that "the Doctor does not think it worth mentioning, that almost the whole crew were suffering intolerably, by hunger and nakedness; and it is very evident, that he thought more of

37. William Ray, (1808). *Horrors of Slavery, Or, The American Tars in Tripoli*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 30.

38. *Ibid.*, 15.

39. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

40. *Ibid.*, 48.

41. *Ibid.*, 56.

42. *Ibid.*, 68.

uniform coats, than of his naked countrymen, who had no coats to put on.”⁴³ This emphasis on how class distinctions were considered more important than national affiliations becomes a major preoccupation in Ray’s account and, directly commenting on this inaccurate notion of a collective identity, he notes that “when the Doctor says *we*, it is the very same as if he had said *we* officers only.”⁴⁴

These inaccuracies also relate to other forms of official authority, and Ray does not spare officials such as the Bashaw or Captain Bainbridge from his critique. Whereas Cowdery portrays the Bashaw in a very positive manner, Ray once again focuses on the fact that not all captives had the same treatment and that their hardships were indeed undermined in the doctor’s account. In this respect, Ray also refers to the petition which was given by the captives requesting an end to their sufferings and that the Bashaw immediately gave orders that no violence was to be used by any of the Turks. However, Ray explains that this was not the end of the story since the Bashaw’s orders “were insincere and illusive, for the very next day he stood by and saw several of us severely beaten innocently, without the least apparent dissatisfaction.”⁴⁵ This is never mentioned in the doctor’s account and even if one may argue that the doctor was not present during this incident, it is interesting to note how the doctor never refers to any acts of physical violence being enacted against his countrymen.

Ray’s attack also turns against Captain Bainbridge who abandons the sailors without any attempt of ameliorating their sufferings. In this respect, Ray inquires “what must we, then, think of a commander, who would give up his men to the enemy, contrary to their wishes, and then abandon them to starve, or rely on the mercy of sanguinary barbarians?”⁴⁶ Neither expecting an answer, nor finding any justification for the Captain’s action, Ray is indeed attacking the highest form of authority that sailors were accustomed to, thus also exposing the impossibility of defining, or reimagining, a homogeneous national identity. Even a Neapolitan slave whom the captives ransom after their own liberation, seriously repents leaving Tripoli “when he found what severity was practiced in [the American naval] service.”⁴⁷ For a man whose liberty had just been restored by the nation of liberty and equality, the Neapolitan serves as a paradigm in Ray’s account of the tyrannical rule of American officers, but quite ironically, also implies that Tripoli served as a more egalitarian space than the authoritarian American ship where he found himself finally “free.”

This is not the only instance where the Barbary States seem to provide a more democratic space than the United States, and Ray admits that a woman can divorce her husband if he does not provide her with a comfortable life, while he also challenges stereotypical notions of Islam constituting a polygamist religion since “none but the opulent are able to indulge themselves in this privilege.”⁴⁸ In this respect, whereas Ray does not portray his captors in a favourable manner, it seems that he is more inclined to believe that there is more humanity and equality in the city of Tripoli rather than at home. He thus admits that “although the general character of the Tripolitans is marked by an assemblage of the most degrading and atrocious vices, yet there may be found amongst them, men of liberal and charitable sentiments, fair and honorable characters, humane and generous dispositions, and real friends to mankind.”⁴⁹ Interestingly enough, these are not characteristics that he ever attributes to his fellow countrymen and especially to the higher officials who seem more interested in their own personal interests rather than in the crew’s sufferings. Taken in a wider framework, Ray exhibits his own class consciousness, but at the same time, expresses his anxiety over national solidarity in the face of these “Others” which are more humane than his own compatriots.

43. Ibid, 60.

44. Ibid, 57.

45. Ibid, 87.

46. Ibid, 61.

47. Ibid, 107.

48. Ibid, 119.

49. Ibid, 123.

6 Conclusion

To return to *Orientalism*, Said notes that “the construction of identity ... involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us.’ Each age and society recreates its ‘Others,’”⁵⁰ However, as this paper attempts to show, the establishment of such differences is never quite achieved in captivity literature, where tensions, ambivalences and paradoxes as expressed by the captives themselves challenge the formation of any rigid dichotomies as Self—Other or Occident—Orient, and where spaces which were deemed separate, become inescapably hybrid and interpenetrating. Even more importantly, these accounts indicate that the very notion of a homogeneous national identity is undermined, as issues related to superiority, alterity and transformation are constantly negotiated on an individual as well as (trans)national level. Indeed, even though there is a strong emphasis on the forging of a new identity on an individual as well as national level, American Barbary captivity narratives of the era illustrate that the establishment of this identity is constantly disrupted by the heterotopic nature of the Mediterranean, a space where any attempt to absolutize difference remains ineffectual as the notion of identity “was frighteningly unstable.”⁵¹ As Michelle Burnham argues in regards to captivity literature in general, what these narratives actually reveal due to their hybrid nature are the “ways in which national and local categories are constructed, revised, and reinvented in a complex of transnational and cross-cultural relations.”⁵²

50. Said, *Orientalism*, 332.

51. Vitkus, *Turning Turk*, 36.

52. Burnham, *Captivity & Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682–1861*, (Hanover, University Press of New England, 1997), 4.

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