Chapter 9

Visual Representation as a Method of Discourse on Captivity, Focused on Cynthia Ann Parker

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Our own existence cannot be separated from the accounts we give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false; fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity—Paul Ricoeur.

—Ebersole 1995 p. 190

The burgeoning field of captivity narrative studies has produced many dynamic and diverse analyses, from historians, literary critics, and feminist writers to ethno-historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and theologians. This rich seam of scholarship has highlighted multiple meanings and issues such as racial imperialism, gender, stereotyping, miscegenation, expansion, and nationalism, which have become enmeshed in the colonial discourses of power between Europeans and American Indians. The illustrations within the narratives, mostly consisting of woodcut engravings, are an obvious source of material for visual analysis, but the wider field of American art also provides appropriate and relevant works to study, from history painting and sculpture to landscapes. The artistic genres used to represent captive subjects and their captors provide useful information on differing stylistic depictions, particularly when those involved were white European females and Indian males, and how such visual constructs inform the overall written history (Truettner 1991).

Although the number of white captives reputedly taken is relatively small in relation to the overall American war story tradition (e.g., an estimated 1,641 were taken in New England between 1675 and
1763; Namias 1993, p. 7), captivity narratives flourished and grew in popularity over three and a half centuries and have been credited with being one of the main founding forces of America’s literary history. The narratives began with Mary Rowlandson’s account in the seventeenth century titled *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs Mary Rowlandson*, published in Boston and London in 1682, and continued through to the captivity romances and dime novels of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and indeed, to the present day. The tradition also flourished in the Western film genre, playing out in such seminal films as *The Searchers* (1956), *Two Rode Together* (1961), *Little Big Man* (1970), *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and *Last of the Mohicans* (1992).

The scope of this chapter is not to produce a geographical or even a historical survey of such captivity narratives, but to contribute an art historical focus to the implications of the story and images relating to the captivity of Cynthia Ann Parker and the public perception of her life over the period following her initial capture. This will be contextualized by discussing stereotypical depictions of white female captives from the narratives, and images of other significant female “white Indians” who remained with their tribes for many years. Their stories are not generally written in the first person and are few in number, but the reception of their histories creates an interesting counterpoint to the clichéd tropes presented through the captivity narratives.

One of the earliest significant images published is a crude woodcut supposedly depicting a scene from Rowlandson’s capture (see Boyle (1773) edition of the story or Kephart’s (2005), front cover). Mary Rowlandson, dressed in frontier dress, stands outside her house in a determined pose, aiming a musket at three vicious-looking Indians, wielding guns and tomahawks. The image of a woman with a musket had been an accepted and known symbol of patriotic women during the revolutionary era and this image is displaced here onto Rowlandson for effect, rather than as an illustration of what actually occurred (for interpretations of Rowlandson, see Ebersole 1995; Faery 1999; Slotkin 1973; Turner Strong 1999). The counterpart in the later editions, the woodcut of the patriotic mother, pairs with the fighting image to provide a good propaganda device for urging traditional women to take up arms, as if the use of violence would complement rather than compromise femininity and domesticity. The depiction of the Indians is lumpen, wooden, and poorly executed, with no attempt to delineate features or authenticate dress. The very crudeness of their depiction serves to authenticate the sense