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Capturing Prejudice: Representations and Misrepresentations of Native American Women in Captivity Narratives

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Introduction

History has often overlooked the role of Native American women. Aside from historical figures such as Pocahontas and Sacagawea, society has long ignored the voices of Native women, leaving their stories untold. Often white society misunderstood the roles Native American women, leading to unfair stereotypes and portrayals in various medias. While the experiences of American Indian women vary based on tribe, location and time period, prominent Native American historian Theda Perdue has cited the role of Native American women throughout history as “giving and sustaining life.”\(^1\) Whether this contribution was child rearing, providing an economic contribution to society, or as tribal leaders, Native American women have always been active agents in their communities.\(^2\) This contribution is sometimes difficult to recognize in the tumultuous history of the relationship between the United States and Native Americans but cannot be ignored in its significance.

The U.S. policy towards Native Americans has changed significantly throughout history, shifting from assimilation to annihilation at various times. Native societies prior to European contact were incredibly diverse with different languages and traditions. Researchers have estimated that anywhere from 15 to 20 million Native Americans lived in North America before the arrival of Christopher Columbus.\(^3\) Contact with the Europeans proved to be deadly for many tribes as epidemics annihilated Native American populations. Upon colonization of the Americas, Europeans quickly began claiming land, a foreign concept to many tribes who often

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did not practice land-ownership. This fundamental difference quickly led to problems between Native Americans and European colonists, who wanted to economize the resources offered in the Americas. While Natives had complex and sophisticated societies, Euro-Americans typically refused to recognize them and asserted their military power over the tribes. Prior to the formation of the United States, King Phillip’s War, the French and Indian War, and the Revolutionary War, further exasperated the tension between Euro-American settlers and the Native Americans. While Native tribes struggled to coexist with the colonists, wars typically led to the Native Americans losing more land and pitted Natives against white colonists.

Early U.S government policy focused on civilizing Native American tribes. In 1830 however, Congress decided the best solution was to move Native Americans west to reserved lands. This led to the forced removal of over 80,000 Native Americans between 1828 to 1877. The forced removal weakened several tribes and lead to even more population loss. The United States continued to annex states during this time, ignoring Native protests. Events such as the Mexican-American War, which lasted from 1846 to 1848, witnessed the United States annex a large new western territory, without the permission of the thousands of Native and Mexican peoples who were suddenly under the control of the United States. Indian societies struggled to maintain their cultural identities as the military shut down protests and the U.S government assassinated Chiefs who did not abide by U.S. policy. The 1862 Dakota Wars, served as a prime example of this. The Dakota, a branch of the greater Sioux nation, fought back against the after

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the U.S. violated treaties and subjected them to poor living conditions. After their defeat, the United States punished the dissenters in the mass execution of 38 Dakota men. With limited land, population, and resources the Native Americans had few options but to obey the federal government’s instructions.

The U.S. Government tried to figure out the best solution to the Native American “problem,” as settlers expanded west. Meanwhile, Native Americans struggled to come to grips with the seizure of their land. Tribes reacted in several different ways. Some tribes made treaties, most of which the government eventually broke. Other tribes submitted and allowed for some amount of assimilation into white society to take place while others fought back. Tribes that engaged in battle and interacted with settlers sometimes took white captives. Historians estimate that the number of captives taken by Indians is in the tens of thousands. Captive taking was a common practice prior to Euro-Americans colonization of the Americas. Natives often took captives from neighboring tribes during times of war. The taking of captives occurred for several reasons, but the primary reason was revenge. The practice differed by tribe and not all Native Americans participated in captive taking, but those that did had different attitudes about it ranging from torture, to trading captives, to trying to assimilate them into their tribes.

The kidnappings of white settlers led to a new literary phenomenon, most commonly referred to as Indian Captivity Narratives. The seventeenth through the early twentieth century, saw the publication of many fictional stories of Indians kidnapping white people. Additionally, chronicles of actual accounts of white people taken captive by Native Americans circulated.

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10 Ibid.
throughout the United States. Captivity narratives allowed for white society to further the propaganda against Native Americans by claiming to be genuine accounts of what life among Native Americans was like. Very popular during their time, these narratives reflected Americans assumptions and policy during the time of their publication. Whether autobiographies or biographies, both types of narratives presented the opportunity for biases. Unsurprisingly captivity narrative authors typically portrayed their Indian captors negatively, disparaging the whole of the Indian race based on their experiences. As many captivity narrative readers would never meet a Native American person in their lifetimes, these interpretations would have likely had a big impact on how they viewed Native Americans.

Historians have written about various aspects of captivity narratives. Topics range from white female captives, to the portrayal of Indian men and to using specific narratives to explain conflicts such as the Dakota Wars. However, depictions of Native American women have been looked over in this field of study. Many captivity narratives do not mention Native American women. Disregarded by white society, narratives, especially those penned by men, often referenced Native American women only in passing or when talking about food preparation. While captivity narratives did not give Native American women a voice, they reflected the United State’s biased and typically incorrect views of Indian women. Within white captivity narrative’s, authors depicted Native American women in ways which propagated Euro-American cultural assumptions. In defining the “otherness” of Native American women, the chronicles sought to determine what white women were not. In looking at the historical context of seventeenth through late nineteenth century in regards to Native American women, it is evident

11 Ibid., xiii.
that these ethnocentric representations stemmed from and promoted long-lasting stereotypes of Native American women.

**Stereotypes of Native American Women Within Captivity Narratives**

Captivity narrative authors often propagated popular clichés in their writings about Native American women. One of these images was that of the Indian Princess which had its roots in the romanticized story of Pocahontas and John Smith. Taken captive in Virginia in 1608 by Chief Powhatan, the English explorer John Smith, depicted a scene where the ten-to-twelve-year-old Pocahontas saved his life. The incident was not in his original recount of his captivity and instead Smith told the story eight years later in a letter to the Queen.\(^\text{13}\) Pocahontas was an especially idolized figure because she eventually assimilated into white society, became a Christian, married white colonist John Rolfe, and moved to England. While English settlers took Pocahontas captive in 1609 and soon after moving to England she died of disease, throughout history she became one of the most well known Native American women. A model for all Native Americans to follow, she represented an idealized Indian woman.\(^\text{14}\) This specific image of Native American woman became problematic when white society set certain expectations and standards for all Native women, comparing them to Pocahontas, when it was not realistic or reasonable for most Native women to achieve this ideal.

This image of Indian women coming to the rescue of white captives became a popular and romanticized story which was retold time and time again in captivity narratives. These


saviors often manifested as benevolent elderly women or young Pocahontas-like women.\textsuperscript{15}

Captive Josiah Mooso presented almost a retelling of the Pocahontas story in his 1888 narrative, in which an unidentified Columbia River tribe captured him. Mooso, a member of the American Fur Company, had been on a fur trapping expedition when the Native Americans took him and five other trappers captive. Three days into the captivity, the Natives killed the five other trappers but Mooso’s life was spared by a “young Indian girl about sixteen years of age,” named Poma after he was almost burned at the stake.\textsuperscript{16} Mooso later escaped after tricking Poma and he wrote his memoir several decades after his capture. Mooso’s story clearly mirrored that of Pocahontas and John Smith, in which a young Indian woman came to the rescue of a captive. In describing the “young girl in all her native grace,”\textsuperscript{17} he continued the stereotype of captives giving certain Native women positive traits because they saved the captives life. In most captivity narratives, this type of praise was only allotted to one or two women, as the authors categorized them as exceptions to the rule.\textsuperscript{18}

Several captivity narratives followed this pattern of praising only a few Native women, and pitting them against the other uncivilized women who continued in their seemingly savage ways. Mary Schwandt-Schmidt, chronicled this idea in her narrative of her captivity during the Dakota Conflict. Born in Berlin Germany, she and her family moved to Minnesota when she was a child. When the outbreak occurred she attempted to escape but the Dakota captured the teenage Schwandt-Schmidt. Her parents and all but one of her siblings was killed in the outbreak. The

\textsuperscript{15} Read further in Kathryn Zabelle-Stoodla \textit{The Indian Captivity Narrative}.


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and Levernier, \textit{The Indian Captivity Narrative 1550-1900}, 87.
Dakota released her six weeks later after an Indian woman named Maggie helped to protect her, hiding Schwandt-Schmidt in her tipi. She praised Maggie explaining that she “was one of the handsomest Indian women I ever saw, and one of the best. She had been educated and was a Christian. Often and often she preserved me from danger, and sometimes, I think she saved my life.”¹⁹ While an atypical positive depiction of Native American woman, Maggie’s characterization as an educated Christian, similar to Pocahontas, made Schwandt-Schmidt’s praise acceptable to white society. Schwandt-Schmidt writing about Maggie being the most beautiful Native women she met, further differentiated Maggie from the uncivilized women of her tribe. While she was clearly thankful to Maggie, she disparaged the other Native Americans referring to them as “vile and bloody wretches.”²⁰ She later testified against the Dakota tribe and was especially concerned with the money which she and family lost during the conflict. The descriptions of Maggie versus the other Dakota people clearly illustrated that Schwandt-Schmidt believed that Maggie was distinct from the rest of her tribe and that her Christian upbringing made her more civilized compared to the others in her tribe.

It is clear from some of the captivity narratives that the authors had read the idealized stories of Pocahontas which led to certain expectations of the Native American race. Fanny Kelly, who the Oglala Lakota, a branch of the greater Sioux Nation, took captive in Wyoming in 1864, spoke about this topic in her narrative. Originally from Canada, she and her husband were traveling as a part of a wagon train heading west when the Oglala Lakota met them and attacked without warning. The Oglala Lakota warriors killed most of the wagon train, but Kelly’s husband managed to escape. Meanwhile, Kelly, her niece Mary, Mary Hurley, Sarah Larimer and

¹⁹ Mary Scwandt-Schmidt, The Story of Mary Schwandt: Her Captivity During the Sioux ‘Outbreak,’ of 1862 in Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society 6 (1894), 471.
²⁰ Ibid., 473.
Larimer’s son were taken captive. Mary Hurley was scalped after trying to escape, while the 
Larimer’s escaped within days of their capture. Kelly attempted to help her niece escape but the 
young girl was never recovered. Kelly spent five months among the Oglala Lakota and slowly 
learned a little of their language and customs. She tried to escape a few times but was 
unsuccessful. Throughout her captivity, the Oglala Lakota were fighting against the Union Army 
who the U.S. government dispatched to help with the Dakota Conflict of 1862. General Alfred 
Sully organized Kelly’s release with the help of another branch of the Sioux who assured her 
rescue. Kelly was reunited with her husband and later moved to Kansas. After her captivity, 
Sarah Larimer later went on to publish a narrative, which she published before Kelly’s, stealing 
many aspects of Kelly’s account. Kelly sued the Larimer’s and won the case and published her 
book around ten years after her initial capture. Reflecting upon her captivity, Kelly explained 
her disappointment upon meeting her captors:

I had read of the dusky maidens of romance; I thought of all the characters of romance 
and history, wherein the nature of the red man is enshrined in poetic beauty… The stately 
Logan, the fearless Philip, the bold Black Hawk, the gentle Pocahontas: how unlike the 
greedy, cunning and cruel savages who had so ruthlessly torn me from my friends!… 
They amuse and beguile the hours they invest with their interest; but the true red man, as 
I saw him, does not exist between the pages of many volumes.

For Kelly, the popularized stories of Native Americans that she read prior to her captivity, 
created unrealistic and idealized versions of Native Americans. Despite most Americans refusal 
to view Native Americans as equals, the United States population had a continued fascination 
with Indians and continuously romanticized them. Kelly did not see the “gentle Pocahontas”

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21 Fanny Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker 
City Publishing House, 1873), 255.
22 Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and Levernier, *The Indian Captivity Narrative 1550-1900*, 12
23 Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, 77.
during her captivity and instead saw her captives as cruel women who did not intend to rescue or protect her. White society glorified the Indians to the point where real figures such as Pocahontas became simplified characters which did not reflect the realities of Native American women across the Americas.

On the other hand, one of the most common negative stereotypes of Native American women in captivity narratives prevailed in the depiction of the “squaw drudge.” A popular term in referring to Native American women, many authors used the word squaw to in their captivity narratives. While the term had its roots in an Algonquin word for woman, it was broadly applied to women from all tribes prevailing as a widely-used label from the seventeenth through through twentieth century. Over time the word became increasingly derogatory in usage. Captive Minnie Buce Carrigan’s narrative showed the negative connotation of the word “squaw.” A German immigrant, Carrigan’s family lived in Minnesota and had positive relationships towards the Dakota before the 1862 uprising. Only about seven years old at the time of her capture she and her siblings spent around six weeks among the Dakota until the U.S. army stepped in. As she was a child during the uprising, she published her narrative around forty years after the Dakota Conflict. During her captivity two kind elderly Native women took her and her siblings in and cared for them after their parents were killed. Speaking about their kindness she wrote, “It seemed wrong to me to call these two Indian women squaws, for they were as lady-like as any white women and I shall never forget them.” From Carrigan’s point of view, the word “squaw” was an offensive term meant for uncivilized and unladylike women. Carrigan represented the

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26 Minnie Buce Carriagan, *Captured by the Indians: Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in Minnesota*. (Forest City, SD: Forest City Press, 1907), 19.
greater white societies views of classifying “squaws” as bad. Following along with the idea of
the idealized Indian princess, Carrigan called out the two Native women who protected her as the
exceptions to the otherwise savage “squaw” women.

The idea of the squaw drudge remained a popular image for Native American women in
the American imagination. In his 1785, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” future president
Thomas Jefferson talked about this stereotype:

The [Indian] women are submitted to unjust drudgery. This I believe is the case with
every barbarous people. With such, force is law. The stronger sex imposes on the weaker.
It is civilization alone which replaces women in the enjoyment of their natural equality…
Were we in equal barbarism, our females would be equal drudges.27

As someone who promoted westward expansion, Thomas Jefferson clearly aimed to
classify the Native American race as less sophisticated than the Euro-Americans to justify
expansion. While encouraging the idea of Native Americans being barbaric, Jefferson used the
example of mistreating women as an abuse only carried out by barbarous people. Jefferson’s
ideas clearly emphasized that the United States viewed Native Americans as intrinsically lesser
than white society because of their treatment of women. Similarly, over a century later, President
Teddy Roosevelt shared this view and when characterizing his judgements about Native
American gender roles, he stated that “the squaws were the drudges who did all the work.”28

The stereotype of the squaw drudge fully infiltrated white Americans views of Native American
women, including the very powerful spheres of the United States presidencies and continued for
several centuries. Ultimately, both Jefferson and Roosevelt sought to undermine the work ethic
of Native American men by attacking the gender role of Native societies. With self-interest of

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Sons (1926) (As cited in Smits 288).
expansion and land in mind, the two presidents presented a distorted picture of Native people as intrinsically barbaric in nature. Due to the men’s alleged lack of work ethics and their treatment of women, the two leaders sought to show that Native men were not correctly utilizing the land.29 In comparing the gender roles of Native societies to white society, Jefferson and Roosevelt justified the supremacy of white leadership in America by disparaging the perceived structure of Native American gender roles.

Many of the captivity narrative writers furthered the stereotype of the “squaw drudge.” Taken captive by the Comanche in Texas in 1836, Rachel Plummer’s narrative sought to advocate for Texas statehood by illustrating the savageness of the Native Americans. Originally from Illinois, Plummer’s family, the Parkers, migrated to Texas as part of an anti-missionary Baptist movement which her uncle Daniel Parker started. Along with several members of her family, Plummer moved to Texas where the Parkers established a private fort.30 In May of 1836, the Comanche raided Fort Parker where her her family was either murdered or taken captive. While two of her cousins, Cynthia Ann Parker and John Richard Parker assimilated to the Comanche, the seventeen-year-old Plummer struggled throughout her captivity. Giving birth six months into her captivity, she claimed that the Comanche violently murdered her newborn baby because they believed it was slowing down her ability to perform the slave-like labor they forced her to do.31 In captivity for over a year, Plummer was eventually ransomed by Mexican traders.

She was freed in 1837 and died one year after her return to white society.32 In her heavily anti-Indian memoir, Plummer explained her perception of the labor disparity between Indian men and women saying, “The women do all the work except killing the meat - herd the horses, saddle and pack them, build the houses, dress the skins, meat… the men dance every night and women wait on them with water.”33 Plummer’s description of the roles of men and women emphasized Native women’s subservient roles of waiting on men with water and performing strenuous physical labor. In explaining the type of work that the Comanche women carried out, Plummer clearly disparaged what she perceived as severe work.

Fanny Kelly’s narrative depicted a similar picture. Kelly’s account of her captivity continued the idea of the “Squaw Drudge,” as she wrote:

After reaching the spot selected, the ponies are unloaded by the squaws, and turned loose to graze. The tents, or ‘tipis,’ are put up, and wood and water brought for cooking purposes. All drudgery of this kind is performed by the squaws, an Indian brave scorning as degrading all kinds of labor not incident to the chase or the war path.34

Kelly presented the idea that men forced Native women to do demeaning labor, viewing it as degrading. She further highlighted this idea, writing, “The men and boys are not so unsightly in their appearance, being mounted upon good horses and the best Indian ponies, riding in groups, leaving the women and children to trudge along with the burdened horses and dogs.”35 Further pointing out the dishonorable status of Indian women, Kelly reported that not only were the women overworked but they also had to “trudge along,” after the men who rode on horses. While she saw a skewed gender dynamic, Kelly did not try to gain an understanding of why men rode

33 Plummer, *Rachel Plummer’s Narrative of Twenty One Months’ Servitude as a Prisoner Among the Comanche Indians*, 355.
34Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, 175.
35 Ibid., 93.
horses while the women walked along with them and instead simply scorned it as the mistreatment of women. While the reason for this custom was not explained, Kelly did not seek an explanation and instead used language to classify this treatment as wrong.

Another example of the “squaw drudge” can be seen in Theresa Gowanlock’s narrative of her two months amongst the Cree tribe after the attack of Fort Pitt in Saskatchewan. She was educated and lived a comfortable life prior to her captivity. Taken captive by the Cree in 1885 after her husband was killed, she and another woman Theresa Delaney were eventually rescued by a Canadian general. Unlike Fanny Kelly, Gowanlock critiqued the Native women for riding on the horses like the men, illustrating that most captives sought to portray their captors in negative ways whether they viewed the women as equal to the men or not.36 Gowanlock continued the stereotype of the “squaw drudge” saying “The squaws perform all manual labor while the big, lazy, good-for-nothing Indian lolls about in idleness.”37 Characterizing the Indian men as idle continued the identification of Indian men as uncivilized by portraying them as too lazy to perform manual labor and skirting their responsibilities onto the women. Gowanlock suggested that the Native men did not aid the women in any way, and used negative descriptions to mark the men. While she did not represent the women as negatively, she depicted them as trapped by the overpowering men in their societies and therefore unable to break free of their roles. Gowanlock’s narrative also included an illustration in which she depicted, “The way the Indians get their wood, they send their squaws to the bush to cut the wood…” The image depicted a figure struggling with a large load of sticks, captioned “Beasts of Burden.”38

36 Teresa Gowanlock, Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear: The Life and Adventures of Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delaney, (Parkdale, Ont.: Times Office 1885), 32
37 Ibid., 12.
38 Ibid., 13.
caption compared Native American women to animals in the type of labor they performed. In doing this she dehumanized Native women and categorized their labor as equivalent to that of “beasts.”

While Rachel Plummer, Fanny Kelly, and Teresa Gowanlock’s narratives took place over the course of forty years and concerned three different tribes—the Comanche, the Oglala Lakota, and the Cree—the almost identical language in their accounts signifying that the “squaw drudge” stereotype became ingrained in the American public’s imagination. The authors highlighted the laziness of the Indian men and the seemingly humiliating status of the women. However in reality, Indian women have had many different roles which varied based on geographical location and tribe. Most captivity narrative writers interpreted these roles to be negative, employing their Euro-American ideals for women.

Captivity narrative writers typically did not make any sort of distinction between tribes which was necessary for fully understanding and appreciating the responsibilities of Indian women. In tribes east of the Mississippi, women typically did the agricultural field work and in the northwest women were dynamic traders. Native women of the plains were often tasked with packing and carrying tipis. Throughout all tribes, it was common for women to help carry water or wood. While these were the norms for Native women, this type of labor was not typical for white women during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This difference led to misunderstandings for captive women who saw this type of work as not socially acceptable for women to do. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, white women played a very active role in the

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economy of the Americas, working alongside their fathers and husbands in business. After the
industrial revolution, this shifted significantly, creating separate spheres for men and women.
Relegated to the home to be domestics, it was preferable for women to be idle. While this
idleness was only really achieved for upper-class women, the existing ideals for society were that
a woman’s place should be in the home. For captives, witnessing the prescribed labor of Native
women was proof of the uncivilized manner in which Indian women lived as they did not occupy
the same roles as their white counterparts.

Native societies often did not fit into the white mold of separate gender spheres where
men worked outside the home and women stayed home as domestics. While women did much of
the work to maintain the community, in many cases Indian men’s roles led them away from
home as they were hunting or occupied by war. Similar to white women, Native women often
could not partake in certain occupations which involved extreme physical exertion and mobility
due to menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation, which led women to take on other specific gender
roles. As captives typically remained at the homes of their captors it is likely that they saw a
skewed picture where women performed a vast majority of the labor. Captives may have
interpreted the type of work Native American women did to be “men’s work,” but their limited
interpretations represented comparisons to their own experiences. The image of Native American
women as abused and forced to work did not accurately or fairly portray the realities of all
Native American women.

40 Gerda Lerner, “The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of
41 Ibid., 11.
42 Smits, “The Squaw Drudge,” 296
43 Ibid., 295.
The stereotype of the “squaw drudge” falls in direct contrast with captive Mary Jemison’s explanation of labor. Taken captive at age 12 during the French and Indian War, a group of Shawnee Indians and Frenchmen killed her family. Adopted by women in the Seneca tribe, Jemison fully assimilated into the Native American way of life. She learned the language, accepted the Indian culture, married a man from the Delaware tribe and had several children. In her account, she recorded, “Our labor was not severe… without that endless variety that is to be observed in the common labor of the white people… [Indian Women’s] task is probably not harder than that of white women, who have those articles provided for them.”44 The labor differences between Native American women and white women might not have been as different as some captives portrayed it. It is possible that white women misinterpreted the type of work that these women performed. As Mary Jamison assimilated and had a significantly more well-rounded experience than captives like Rachel Plummer, Fanny Kelly, and Teresa Gowanlock who completely rejected the Native American way of life, her view was a more of a reasonable view of Native society. She pointed out that white women have “those articles provided from them,” meaning that even though much of the work that Native women carried out was without certain technologies, their tasks were similar and not much more laborious than white women’s jobs. Certainly, differences existed depending on the tribe but the idea that all Native American women did more intense labor than white women was not true.

Contrasting White and Native American Women in Captivity Narratives

While Native American’s often killed male prisoners, they typically treated women more as prisoners of war, leading to more captivity narratives by or about women.\textsuperscript{45} Scholars such as Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stoodla and Christopher Castiglia have highlighted the new agency some captive women found during their captivity. While female captives often expressed their new found freedom from men in these narratives, they continued the pattern of vilifying Native American’s. The descriptions of Native American women in white women’s captivity narratives are especially telling, as white women detailed their seemingly savage and disgraceful status.

Authors commonly depicted Native American women as violent aggressors and several captivity narratives described Native women attacking or abusing white women. Typically in these narratives, Native women actually lashed out and physically attacked the captive women while Native men provided more of a looming threat of murder. Captives typically described these accounts in a very one-sided manner and it is was typically described that Native women attacked because they enjoyed violence. An example of this was in Mary Rowlandson’s very early and popular account of her captivity during the 1675 King Phillip’s War, in which the Narragansett, Wampanoag and Nashaway Indians attacked Lancaster, Massachusetts. Coming from a wealthy and religious background, Rowlandson was an important political prisoner due to her husbands role in the community. She was the first captive of taken during the King Phillip’s War to be ransomed and released.\textsuperscript{46} Rowlandson’s husband was absent during the attack of Lancaster and her daughter died soon after she was taken captive. Her narrative was the first ethnography about Native American life written by a woman and it became an example for many

\textsuperscript{45} Zabelle Derounian-Stodola and Levernier, \textit{The Indian Captivity Narrative 1550-1900}, xv.
captive narrative authors to follow.\textsuperscript{47} One of the most popular narratives, it was a best seller during its time, selling over a thousand copies in its first year of publication and it has since been republished several times.\textsuperscript{48} Setting the precedent of talking about the violence of Native American women that she experienced, Rowlandson wrote, “I removed a stick that kept the heat from me, a Squaw moved it down again, at which I lookt up and she threw a handful of ashes in my eyes; I thought I should have been quite blinded and have never seen more…”\textsuperscript{49} While she did not end up blind the only information about Mary Rowlandson’s attack was that she moved a stick from the fire and then a Native woman threw ashes at her. This portrayal of the situation made the Native American women appear unreasonably cruel. The one-sided explanation of the situation was dangerous in how it portrayed Native American women. It represented bias of Rowlandson as a victim and made the Native American woman the villain.

Mary Rowlandson further documented how her religion and faith affected her captivity, contrasting Christianity with the savage ways of the Native women. A staunch Puritan, Rowlandson described a scene of her “mistress” after coming back from a funeral writing, “she found me sitting and reading in my Bible: she snatched it hastily out of my hand and threw it out the doors; I ran out, and catcht it up, put it into my pocket, and never let her see it afterward.”\textsuperscript{50} Not only did this passage decry the Native woman for disrespecting the Bible but it stressed Mary Rowlandson’s role as a good Christian woman, which Anglo-American society valued and exalted. In showing that Native women did not respect the Bible, Rowlandson immediately polarized Native American women as being against the main beliefs of white society.

\textsuperscript{48} Zabelle Derounian-Stoodla, Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives, 3.
\textsuperscript{49} Mary Rowlandson, A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, (London: Joseph Poole 1682), 29.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 28.
Comparing themselves to Native American women, the authors rarely failed to depict themselves in a positive light, focusing on their roles as the moral centers of white society, while rendering Native American women as an “other” in every possible way. In her 1795 captivity narrative which documented her time amongst the Shawnee after her kidnap in Virginia, Mary Kinnan compared the two while also demonizing Native American women. Kinnan’s memoir, which followed the Revolutionary War, included anti-British propaganda which denounced the British for their support of the Native Americans as separate nations from the United States.51 Leading up to the War of 1812, tensions between England and the United States escalated and Native Americans became caught in the middle and forced to choose sides. Portraying Native Americans as uncivilized to solidify the United State’s authority, Kinnan wrote:

One of the principal objects of my attention, whilst I lived amongst the Indians, was the humiliating condition of their women. Here the female sex, instead of polishing and improving the rough manners of the men, are equally ferocious, cruel, and obdurate. Instead of the benevolent disposition and warm sensibility to the sufferings of the others, which marks their characters in more civilized climes, they quaff with ecstatic pleasure the blood of the innocent prisoner, writing with agony under the inhuman torments inflicted upon him—whilst his convulsive groans speak music to their souls.52

In this comparison, not only did Mary Kinnan define white women’s roles, but she defined why Native American women were savage in comparison. She cited improving the lives of men as the primary role of white women, using common eighteenth-century ideals to support this claim. Meanwhile, she criticized Native American women for sharing certain characteristics that she deemed to be masculine, portraying these as extremely negative traits for women to have. She emphasized the Native women’s lack of sympathy that women in “more civilized climes” had and also stressed their love of violence. This type of comparison not only vilified the Native

American women allowing white society to characterize them as lesser than white women, but also clearly characterized the societal expectations preferred for white women. By representing Native women as the opposite of white women, Kinnan demonstrated how important it was for captives to differentiate themselves from Native women. While she described Native women as more equal to Native men in behavior than white women were to white men, the traits she prescribed were all negative. Clearly drawing attention the different roles for men and women in white society, Kinnan clearly did not believe that men and women should share the same traits. In vilifying the women for lacking feminine attributes, she denigrated Native American women by portraying them as fundamentally different from their white counterparts.

Mirroring some of the ideas presented in her predecessors narratives, Rachel Plummer described a scenario where she refused to retrieve a tool to dig roots with for her “mistress.” The two women then got into a physical fight and Plummer described the scene saying that she engaged in the fight because, “Having lived as long, and indeed longer than life was desirable, I determined to aggravate them to kill me.” In doing this she justified her violence as an attempt to get the Native Americans to kill her. She reasoned that otherwise she would not have engaged in such violence and explained that she intended to “make a cripple” out of her attacker. Plummer was not punished for this as the Comanche’s respected her right to fight back when attacked. Later she again defended herself when a woman tried to set her on fire. Plummer responded by pushing the woman into the fire. The idea of white women fighting back against Native women and winning was a common theme in other narratives. The Native women were always portrayed as the aggressors in the situation while the white women fought back and

53 Plummer, *Rachel Plummer’s Narrative of Twenty One Months’ Servitude*, 108
54 Ibid.
usually prevailed victorious. Not only did this characterize Indian women as brutal and barbarous but as the captives typically fought back and won, it exemplified the alleged superiority of white women over Indian women.

Rachel Plummer continued her negative portrayal of the Native women in comparison to white women when explaining the Comanche rituals after acquiring prisoners:

They cut them up, broiled and boiled and ate them. My young mistress got a foot, roasted it, and offered me part of it. They appear to be very fond of human flesh. The hand or foot, they say, is the most delicious. These inhuman cannibals will eat the flesh of a human being and talk of their bravery or abuse their cowardice with as much unconcern as if they were mere beasts.55

This accusation of the Comanche being cannibals went further in condemning the Native American race for being barbaric. There is no evidence to confirm the Comanche’s ever partook in cannibalistic rituals. In fact, there is more evidence that the Comanche tribe greatly disapproved of cannibalism as they denounced a neighboring tribe, the Tonkawa, who actually did occasionally engage in cannibalism.56 This could suggest that Rachel Plummer fabricated the story of cannibalism to further characterize her captors as barbaric and uncivilized as she claimed that cannibalism was common among the Comanche. Similar to Mary Rowlandson calling out her “mistress,” Rachel Plummer specifically singled out her “young mistress” as being a cannibal before further defining that all Native Americans were inhuman. While the implication was that all Native Americans participated in cannibalistic traditions, Rachel Plummer directly contrasted herself to her “young mistress” and further stereotyped Native women as savage and opposite from white women.

55 Ibid, 114.
White male captives were especially critical of Native women’s physical appearances criticizing them as being ugly in comparison to white women. During his 1790 captivity, lawyer Charles Johnston spent five weeks among the Shawnee. Breaking the mold of many captivity narratives, the Shawnee killed the women that Johnston was traveling with while taking him prisoner. He was later ransomed by a Canadian trader and wrote about his time amongst the Shawnee. During his captivity, he shared that he was at one point betrothed to a Native women that he never met while in captivity. At first horrified at the idea of “leading to the altar of Hymen an Indian squaw,” Johnston prescribed to Euro-American beliefs of a woman’s virtuousness. Johnston did not see the Shawnee woman as virtuous and did not want to marry her. After escaping the Indians, he wondered about, “whether she was old or young, ugly or handsome, deformed or beautiful.” Upon seeing her later though, he explained that he, “could not help chuckling at my escape from the fate which had been intended for me. She was old, ugly, and disgusting.” While Johnston did not meet her or exchange any words with her, her physical appearance alone was enough to disgust Johnston who prioritized her beauty over anything else. From this description it is clear that Johnston did not see her as a suitable bride because of her appearance.

Meanwhile, captive Josiah Mooso’s critiques of Naive American women went beyond just physical appearance. While the native girl Poma saved his life, he later revealed that she wanted to marry him. Not reciprocating her feelings, he explained his situation writing, “My

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 113
conscience, even now, smites me to think of the deception I practiced upon this woman, to whom
I owe my life, but as an excuse I will plead that being a white man and she an Indian was
sufficient grounds for not wishing to take her as my wife…”61 From Mooso’s point of view, the
fact that Poma was Native American was enough to explain why he did not want to marry her.
While he felt guilty for tricking her, the idea of marrying an Indian woman was not acceptable to
Mooso. Mooso’s view was not unique and reflected the views of most of U.S. society, where
states created various miscegenation laws to stop people of different races from mixing.
However, for Mooso it is clear that Poma’s race was an immediate indicator of unsuitability
which he could not look past.

Captivity narrative authors often ascribed Native women traits such as being incredibly
jealous and spiteful, while the white women highlighted their own piety. Dakota Conflict
captive, Sarah F. Wakefield described the women that she lived with in this vein. Married to
John Wakefield, a doctor for the Upper Sioux Agency, the Wakefield’s lived a fairly luxurious
life for frontier people.62 During the outbreak of the Dakota Conflict, a man named Chaska,
whom she had known for several years and she claimed was civilized, took Wakefield under his
protection. While Wakefield would later testify on behalf of Chaska after her release, she had
nothing nice to say about Winona, Chaska’s wife.63 Describing Winona, Wakefield wrote, “All
little articles, such as miniatures, etc., she would destroy before me, and would laugh when she
saw I felt sad. I would like to be her judge, if she is ever brought within my reach.”64 Portraying

62 Zabelle-Derounian-Stodola, The War in Words: Reading the Dakota Conflict through
Captivity Literature, 68.
63 Ibid., 69
64 Sarah F. Wakefield, Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity, in
Katherine Zabelle Derounain-Stoodla, ed. Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives, (New York:
Winona as cruel and uncaring, Wakefield separated herself from her captor, clearly defining herself as the victim. The reader was clearly supposed to sympathize with Wakefield and view Winona as the antagonist. While Wakefield specifically talked about one Indian woman, the implication of Winona’s savagery and hatefulness furthered the narrative that until white society took action Native Americans would act cruelly and senselessly towards white people. In this characterization of Winona, she clarified that it was not just Indian men who deserved judgment but also Indian women. By stating that she would like to be Winona’s judge, Wakefield also put the responsibility on white society to be the judges of Native Americans.

After looking forward to meeting the Native American women and hoping to find solace with her own gender, Fanny Kelly expressed her first impression of the Native women as she recounted the presentation of the items stolen from her wagon train to the chiefs many wives:

> It was spread out before them, the women gathered admiringly round it, and proved their peculiarities of taste… Eagerly they watched every new article displayed, grunting their approval, until their senior companion seized a piece of cloth, declaring that she meant to retain it all for herself. This occasioned dissatisfaction, which soon ripened to rebellion among them, and they contended for a just distribution of the goods… I had so hoped to find sympathy and pity among these artless women of the forest, but instead, cowed and trembling, I sat, scarcely daring to breathe. 65

According to expectations in white society during this era, women were supposed to be pious and pure and characterized as true women.66 Traits such as “jealousy and hatred” were in direct contrast to these ideals. Fanny Kelly interpreted the reaction of the Indian women to be unsympathetic, labeling them as “artless” and unable to connect with her on an emotional level. Grouping the women together, she generalized them all negatively. She did not allow any of them positive descriptions and made it seem as though malicious behavior was simply part of

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65 Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, 83-84.
Native American women’s character. Kelly further described her point of view of one of the Oglala Lakota ceremonies saying, “I first saw the scalp dance… The women, too, took part in the dance, and I was forced to mingle in the fearful festivity…” Here, Kelly reported that she was required to participate in the scalp dance with obvious disapproval, specifically highlighting how the Native women took part in the scalp dance alongside the men. In clearly calling out the women in this passage, Kelly reassured the reader that Native American women were just as savage and uncivilized as Indian men and that they too engaged in barbaric heathen ceremonies.

The Assimilation of Native American Women in Captivity Narratives

Captives appeared to have mixed feelings about the assimilation of Native Americans as their comments differed significantly from narrative to narrative. While some narratives praised the assimilated women for being more civilized, other captives scorned that Native American’s would never be able to assimilate into white society by portraying them as inferior. Early narratives typically did not even entertain the idea of Native American’s assimilating to white society. However Native women became especially ingrained in white society, by marrying and bearing children by white men, the question of if Native Americans could assimilate became increasingly more important.

Over time, as Native American policy began to change, captivity narratives began to focus on the assimilation of Native Americans. Later narratives put a strong emphasis on the effects of assimilation on the Indians. Captive Mary Jemison, who assimilated into the Seneca tribe, was very opposed to the assimilation of Native Americans into white society as she wrote:

I have seen, in a number of instances the effects of education upon some of our Indians, who were taken when young, from their families, and placed at school before they had an

67 Kelly, *Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians*, 95.
opportunity to contract many Indian habits, and there kept till they arrived to manhood, but I have never seen one of those but what was an Indian in every respect after he returned. Indians must and will be Indians, in spite of all the means that can be used for their cultivation in the sciences and arts.  

Although Jemison defended Native American culture and reasoned against assimilation, her comments asserted that she believed fundamental differences existed between white Americans and Native Americans. She believed that Native Americans would never be able to fully assimilate no matter what type of education they received. From the point of view of a Seneca woman, Jemison did not approve of educating Native American’s in Euro-American ways. While not stating that Native Americans were less than white people, Jemison wanted them to remain separate from white society. Published in 1824, Jemison’s account occurred roughly fifty years before the Native American boarding school movement which swept the United States in the 1870’s. Such early disapproval of education of Native Americans shows that assimilation tactics had already had negative reception based on earlier educational attempts.

The Dakota Conflict in 1862 was one of the major events that spurred the question of assimilation. The captives of the Dakota Conflict typically had negative reactions to the assimilation of Native Americans. Many of them grew up with friendly relations towards the Indians and saw their uprising and protest as betrayal. In Minnie Buce Carrigan’s account, she described how she not only grew up as friends with the neighboring Indians but also “learned a little of the Sioux language.” However after a while when the Native’s began to reject the encroachment of white people on their land, Carrigan explained:

They became disagreeable and ill-natured. They seldom visited us and when they met us, passed by coldly and sullenly and often without speaking. On one occasion some of them

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68 Seaver, A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison, 150
69Carriagan, Captured by the Indians: Reminiscences of Pioneer Life in Minnesota, 7.
camped in my father’s woods and began cutting down all the young timber and leaving it on the ground… a squaw caught up a large butcher knife and chased him away...  

The Carrigan’s viewed the woods as belonging to them, however, the Native’s did not agree with this seizure of their land and were prepared to fight back. This shift in attitudes was surprising to the Carrigan family, who had seen the neighboring Dakota as friends. The Carrigan’s took the hostility personally. While the Carrigan’s originally viewed the Dakota as friends, they saw that the Native Americans would remain loyal to their tribe and that white people should not trust even seemingly friendly Indians. In her eyes, the Native Americans were unassimilable. Specifically calling out a “squaw” for chasing her father, Carrigan clearly wanted the reader to side with her family over the Natives as she viewed the land as being owned by her family instead of recognizing who it originally belonged to. While it was the Natives whose land was being taken away, by portraying the “squaw” woman as violent and angry it justified the reasoning for taking the land away from them, making the Carrigan family the victims.

In addition, captive Sarah F. Wakefield shared a similar account. Due to Wakefield’s husband’s occupation as a doctor for the Sioux, before the uprising she had positive relations with the Native Americans. She talked about her favorable views writing, “I will state in the beginning I found them very kind, good people. The women have sewed for me, and I have employed them in various ways around the house, and began to love and respect them as well as if they were whites.” Speaking of the Native American women that worked for her, Wakefield viewed them as assimilated from Native ways due to their positive attributes. Clarifying that this belief was “in the beginning,” Wakefield clearly had a change of heart after the Native

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70 Ibid, 10.
72 Wakefield, Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity, 247
Americans, who she had once loved and respected, remained loyal to their tribes. This comment suggests that Wakefield questioned the loyalty of Native Americans as she had seen them gradually shift from seemingly assimilated to aggressive in the uprising.

Sharing a different point of view, Nancy McClure Huggans story furthered the narrative of fundamental differences between Native American women and white women. Huggans's mother was Dakota Sioux and her father was a United States general. Despite the fact that her father abandoned her family when she was young, Huggans romanticized her father as a heroic General and demonized her Dakota relatives. Educated in a Christian missionary school, Huggans remained critical of the Dakota and attempted to distance herself from them to assert her citizenship throughout her narrative. Explaining the situation of half-Native people during the Dakota Conflict she wrote, “They were cursing the half-breeds… You know that only a very few half-breeds took part in the outbreak. The Indians have always bitterly hated the half-breeds for their conduct in favor of the whites in that and other wars and they hate them still.”73 In defending herself and other “half-breeds” in the Dakota Conflict, Huggans endeavored to dissociate herself from the Dakota. By pitting Indians against half-breeds, Huggans tried to shed her Native American ancestry. Despite having lived with her Native American grandmother and mother for most of her life, Huggans saw herself as more connected to her white heritage. Her education in missionary schools and the negative connotations of the Dakota which she experienced deeply affected her point of view and led her to reject her Indian ethnicity.

Later in the narrative, Huggans became involved in a physical altercation with a Dakota woman where she furthered the narrative of Native American’s hating half-breeds:

An Indian woman near me began abusing us. She said: ‘When we talk of killing these half-breeds they drop their heads and sneak around like a bird-dog.’ Her taunting speech stung me to the heart and I flew at that woman and routed her so completely that she bore the marks for some time and I am sure she remembered the lessons a great deal longer! Perhaps it was not a very ladylike thing to do but I was dreadful provoked. Most of my companions were greatly pleased, and the Indians did not interfere.\footnote{Ibid.}

Huggans defeat of the Indian woman not only continued the theme of white women physically defeating Native women, as seen in other narratives, but also served as an example of Huggans proving her allegiance to white society. In physically attacking a Native American woman, Huggans showed that she had no loyalty to the Dakota. Citing the Indian woman as threatening half-breeds, Huggans severed the tie between “half-breeds” and Native Americans, portraying herself as a victim of discrimination. Perceiving herself to be far more enlightened and evolved compared to the rest of the Dakota women, Huggans denouncement of the Native woman showed that she believed that assimilation was possible.

Two years after the Dakota Conflict, Fanny Kelly’s account also delved into the topic of “half-breeds” and marriage between Native American women and white men. After meeting a Native woman who had a child with a white military man but had to return to her tribe after the man’s white wife from the east arrived, she lamented:

The little boy… was a very bright, attractive child of about four years. It was a very sad thought for me to realize that a parent could part with such a child, committing it forever to live in barbarous ignorance, and rove the woods among savages with the impress of his own superior race, so strongly mingled with his Indian origin. I saw many other fair-faced little children, and heard the sad story from their mothers, and was deeply pained to see their pale, pinched features, as they cried for food when there was none to be had.\footnote{Kelly, \textit{Narrative of My Captivity Among the Sioux Indians}, 84-85.}

While in this passage Kelly criticized the military man for abandoning his child, ultimately she viewed the mother’s race as inferior and pitied the child for growing up amongst the “savage”
and “ignorance” of the Indians. While she interpreted the mothers of mixed-race children as being deeply attached to their children, she also implied that the children would be better suited living with their white relatives. Kelly published her account in 1871, around the same time as the Native American boarding school movement in the United States. Although she never directly accused the Native American women of being bad mothers, her critiques suggested that the mothers were unable to take care of their children due to their lifestyles. She clearly stated her belief that the children of white men deserved to be among the “superior race.” Kelly’s views reflected the general opinions of assimilation during the 1870’s of attempting to assimilate Indian children regardless of the wishes of their mothers and fathers.

While Kelly showed sympathy for the Native American children and did not admonish their mothers, she did suggest not to trust Native American women. Talking to another Indian woman who married a white man before returning to the Oglala Lakota tribe she recalled:

They were esteemed friendly, and had often received supplies from the fort, although at heart they were always the enemy of the white man. ‘But will they not suspect you?’ asked I. ‘They may discover your deceit and punish you some day.’ She laughed derisively. ‘Our prisoners don’t escape to tell tales,’ she replied. ‘Dead people don’t talk. We claim friendship, and they can not prove that we don't feel it. Besides, all white soldiers are cowards.’

Using the general term of “they,” Kelly generalized that all Native American women believed they were enemies of the white man. As marriages between white men and Native women became more and more common over time, Kelly warned that white people should be wary and careful about trusting these women, as they could be tricking the white men for the benefit of supplies. Portraying the woman that she talked to as devious and deceitful, she informed her white readers not to rely on Native women. Claiming that they would always be the opponents of

76 Ibid., 120.
white society, Kelly did not see these types of women as ever being able to assimilate to white society as they would, in the end, remain loyal to their tribes. Instead by portraying Native American women as savage and deceitful it suggested to the reader that it was imperative that future generations sever ties with their tribes, Kelly insisted that as long as the Native American tribes existed, Native Americans would continue to pretend to be friendly towards white people, while really harboring ulterior motives.

Conclusion

While captivity narratives are only one example of negative representations of Native Americans, they epitomized greater U.S. societal ideas. Many of the ideas about Native American women as seen in captivity narratives, such as the Indian Princess and the Squaw drudge, have persisted throughout various other medias including literature, illustrations, and film. Historians have continued to untangle the myths that surround the images of Native American women. Captivity narratives present an especially difficult source as the authors advertised their accounts as accurate depictions of what Native Americans were like. However, captive authors obviously brought ethnocentric beliefs to their narratives which affected how they portrayed Native American women. As many narratives were incredibly popular and widely spread during the time of their publication, the narratives and stereotypes influenced readers, leading to more misrepresentations and misunderstandings about Indian women.

After the final push of the United States to take Native lands and relegate Native Americans to reservations, in the 1880’s, Indian captivity narratives slowly began to fade away as tribes no longer had the power or ability to take captives. Their legacies lived on however and the ideas introduced in captivity narratives helped to foster harmful and dangerous ideas about
Native American women. The Native American boarding school movement which began in the 1870’s ripped Native families apart as white society viewed Native American culture as subordinate to white society. While the goal was to assimilate Natives into the “civilized” white society, the psychological effects of trying to destroy Native American culture had detrimental effects on both boarding school students and their families. This not only greatly affected Native mothers, who had their children taken from them, but also influenced a new generation of Native women who white society taught that their cultures were inferior and pushed them to assimilate. The twentieth century saw Native American women's involuntary sterilizations with the rise of the eugenics movement. The movement aimed to eliminate traits that white society viewed as undesirable by white society such as poverty, and criminal behavior. Since white society associated violence, poverty and other negative traits to Native American women, they were especially targeted in forced sterilization. Reportedly around 25 percent of the Native American female population between the ages of fifteen and forty-four underwent sterilization through the 1970’s.\footnote{Sally Torpy, “Native American Women and Coerced Sterilization: On the Trail of Tears in the 1970s” \textit{American Indian Culture and Research Journal}, 24 no. 2 (2000): 3.} Negative opinions that Native women were intrinsically inferior to white women because of their race were clearly influenced by the beliefs laid out in captivity narratives.

Looking back, it would be easy to blame the biases on the authors of the captivity narratives. It is important to look at the narratives through a wider historical lens and realize how society influenced the author’s beliefs. Narratives aimed to provide justification and defense of white supremacy and westward expansion. The portrayals of Native American women continued Euro-American assumptions, defining them as inherently different and in some cases, unassimilable. Often forgotten by history, it is crucial that Native American women are no longer
generalized and defined by white societies' views and are instead represented correctly, accurately, and in their own words.
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