Very Familiar Things: Captivity and Female Fierceness in *Stranger Things*

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Abstract:

This article examines the ways in which the TV series *Stranger Things* adopts selected tropes of the Indian captivity narrative and of the Puritan *Weltanschauung* to build a horror narrative that many found to be relevant, relatable, and enthralling. Studying *Stranger Things*' system of selective citation of the captivity narrative is useful to identify a lineage that leads from Puritan to Hollywood horror, and to show the resilience of a genre across the centuries. The paper examines narrative situations in *Stranger Things* that are strongly reminiscent of the captivity narrative, such as the two intersecting captivities of William Byers and Eleven, the wilderness, concentric circles of evil, the dismissal of the Other, and typology as a means of sense-making. Due to its centrality for both the Indian captivity narrative and *Stranger Things*, the last part concentrates on the theme of female fierceness.

Keywords: Captivity, Stranger Things, Fierceness, Narrative

2015 and 2016 saw the release of the Oscar-winning film *Room* and the Netflix TV series *Stranger Things*—which Elaine Showalter and Joshua Rothman framed as contemporary manifestations of the captivity narrative (see Showalter, "Dark Places" and Rothman, "The Old, American Horror Behind 'Stranger Things'"). *Room* tells the story of a woman taken captive by a sexual predator and the child she begets during her captivity, suggesting that the events could be taking place as we watch. *Stranger Things*, instead, is a sophisticated restaging of the American suburbs in the Eighties: the lethargic community of Hawkins is shaken by the mysterious disappearance of a boy and the simultaneous appearance of a girl with a shaven head and supernatural powers. The series delights its viewers with the revival of retro soundscapes, cars, clothes, hairstyles, and interior design, not to mention the plethora of intertextual references to films that by now have reached the status of classics (*E.T*, *Ghostbusters*, and *Indiana Jones*,to name but a few). The series, however, reaches much further into the past than the Eighties as it appropriates narrative tropes that are typical of seventeenth-century Indian captivity narratives.

My intention is not to put the stamp of the captivity narrative on *Stranger Things*, which would be reductive at best. The two occupy opposite ends of the genre spectrum: the Indian captivity narrative lays vociferous—if misleading—claims to authenticity and historical accuracy, while *Stranger Things* falls comfortably within the realm of fantasy. The captivity narrative also does not figure among the variegated cultural texts that the authors enthusiastically tribute as influential for the show. My aim in this article is rather to examine the ways in which the series adopts selected tenets of the Indian captivity narrative and of the Puritan *Weltanschauung* to build a horror narrative that many found to be relevant, relatable, and enthralling. Studying *Stranger Things*' system of selective citation of the captivity narrative is useful to identify a lineage that leads from Puritan America to Netflix, and to show the resilience of a genre across the centuries. Most importantly, my argument locates the cultural significance of this lineage in the notion of female fierceness and posits the early American captive woman as the typological antecedent of the proverbial 'strong female lead' of contemporary film and television productions.
In *The Terror Dream* (2007) Susan Faludi posits the captivity narrative as a guardian myth of the American psyche, bound to come to the rescue in the face of a crisis, such as King Philip's

War or, more recently, the terror attacks of September 11. With their tropes of male heroism and female vulnerability, captivity narratives were vehicles for the elaboration of terror and the containment, sanitization, and repression of haunting memories. Figures of damsels awaiting rescue by male relatives, agents, or state authorities were central to the logics of the captivity narrative, although in open contradiction with the examples of female self-reliance many of them primarily offer. Caged by male editors, prefacers, rewriters, and annotators, narratives "in which women often were not saved or refused to be saved or saved themselves" (Faludi 213) became the fiction of imperiled womanhood through which male voices rationalized the conquest of the wilderness, so that it could "be made safe for the white woman and the civilization she represents" (Faludi 213). After its inception, the captivity narrative would undergo successive embodiments, most significantly after 9/11, a trauma on a national scale that re-activated "the same consoling formula of heroic men saving threatened women […] an abiding American security myth that had its roots in the captivity narratives of our earliest national experience" (215).

Almost two decades after 9/11, captivity narratives proliferate on screen. This is an incentive to build on Faludi's argument and look into this further "successive permutation" (Faludi 214) of the genre, which features a renewed interest in women's resourcefulness, self-reliance, and survival. As Hollywood and especially television streaming services are making conspicuous efforts to award more centrality to female characters, I argue that the early American captivity narrative, and the wilderness myth of female fierceness often embedded at its core, are being recruited to construct narratives of female empowerment in mainstream film and television. Films and TV series featuring prominent heroines left to fend for themselves in the wilderness attempt to discard the male triumphalist gestures that accompany captivity narratives and foreground reliant female protagonists who "were not saved or refused to be saved or saved themselves."

Although the Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film reports that in 2017-18 the majority of female characters across platforms were more likely than males to play personal life-oriented roles rather than work-oriented roles (see Lauzen 3), and that the percentage of major female characters on streaming programs declined by six percentage points from the previous year (6), several other sources observe an increase in the centrality and impact of female characters. Margaret Tally argues that television streaming outlets, such as Netflix and Showtime, have taken the lead in creating strong anti-heroine characters—so much so that

Netflix created a specific category called "TV Programs Featuring a Strong Female Lead" (Tally 18). Tally's observation reveals that television is not only devoted to increasing the presence of women on screen, but also to creating complex, flawed, and multi-layered "anti-heroines" that do not fit the parameters of vulnerable femininity that have informed much Hollywood storytelling up to the present day. In fact, Tally adds that the complex female leads that are now a "typical feature of many television series" are a "relatively new phenomenon" (1) and the expression of a "new television landscape," showing degrees of complexity that were not available to them in the past (7). Most notably for the purpose of my analysis, this shift towards female-centered products has been attributed to the same factor that, according to Faludi, triggered the return to wilderness narratives: namely, crisis. Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra argue that "the critical mass of female-centered TV notably forms around 2008, in the years immediately following the global financial crisis […]. The interdependent affective ecologies of austerity, precarity, and financialization now distinctly inflect Anglo-American female-centered television." The three authors virtually agree with Faludi in drawing an arch between crisis and the resurfacing of a frontier imaginary, specifically the trope of resilience. They argue that "one feature of the new precarity is the widespread deployment of the notion of 'resilience,'" which they qualify as "the ability of a community to bounce back after a disaster" as well as "individual responsibility, adaptability, and preparedness."

Dana Feldman celebrates the Netflix original series *Stranger Things* as exemplary of "the wide appeal of Netflix's female characters." In the show, the Rowlandson prototype appears to be splintered into three women, each of which embodies one of the early American heroine's attributes: Eleven as the captive, Joyce Byers as the mother, and Nancy Wheeler as the rifle-wielding frontierswoman. *Stranger Things* is both a narrative of precarity that explicitly builds on "the ability of a community to bounce back after a disaster" and of female fierceness, and thus shows its indebtedness to frontier imaginaries.

Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer) defending the Byers' house in *Stranger Things*, S2:E8, "Chapter Eight: The Mind Flayer." Image screenshot from 00h 42m 29s.

So do other recent films and shows featuring female figures left to fend for themselves in the wilderness, in the absence of male protectors or surrounded by inadequate ones. This is the case for Susanne Bier's *Bird Box* (2018), John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* (2018), and Scott Frank's series *Godless* (2017).

Malorie (Sandra Bullock) holding a rifle in *Bird Box* (2018). Image screenshot from 00h 35min 20sec.

The iconic figure of the woman holding a rifle, which will receive more attention below, is an iconographic line that connects all these characters and traces them back to their historical progenitor, Mary Rowlandson—whom various illustrations represent in the act of holding rifles as tall as herself.

Woodcut engraving of Mary Rowlandson, from *A Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Nathaniel Coverly, 1770. p. 2. Image from The Library Company of Philadelphia. https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/digitool%3A68213

When juxtaposing the early American captivity narrative and its twenty-first-century "permutation," female violence becomes of paramount importance as the regressive element in an otherwise progressive notion of white female empowerment in US culture. Although this paper is invested in showing the parallels between *Stranger Things* and the early American captivity narrative, with an emphasis on the self-reliant female self, one cannot fail to notice a discrepancy between the pervasive ambiguity of the original texts, where, at times, empathy towards the Native captors ruptures the Puritan semantics of terror and hatred, and *Stranger Things*, where violence and annihilation are uncritically offered as the only solution to interspecies conflict.

In the following pages, I will present narrative situations in *Stranger Things* that are strongly reminiscent of the captivity narrative and elaborate on the numerous parallels between the two. I will mostly take into consideration similarities that revolve around major genre markers such as wilderness imaginaries, typology, the position of the captive, the relationship with the Other, and the nature of evil. Due to the significance of female fierceness for both the Indian captivity narrative and *Stranger Things*, a separate and in-depth analysis of this theme follows in the second part of the paper. I will mostly concentrate on season one, as season two is less concerned with individuals taken captive; but I will also draw on the latter for further insights into character development and world building.

"*Certain Familiar Devils": The Upside Down as Contact Zone*

Peter C. Mancall concisely frames captivity narratives as stories about "the experiences of a captive, usually (but not always) a European caught by an indigenous group" (1019), and this definition applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to *Stranger Things* as well, as the series unfolds from the story of white Anglo-Saxon kids taken captive by creatures who may be indigenous. Although the extradimensional monster the protagonists call "Demogorgon" trespasses into Hawkins, it is humankind, in an act of scientific recklessness, that makes "contact" (*Stranger Thing*s S1:E6), opening the portal to another dimension and allowing the creatures to cross into Hawkins and kidnap its inhabitants for food storage and breeding. Hence, *Stranger Things* is not an alien abduction tale, where human beings fall prey to a terror coming from outer space. It is a situation in which "an entire *alien* civilization lurks on the underside of the known world," (Oates in Rothman, my emphasis). In this context, the world "alien" does not stand for extraterrestrial, but for 'Other,' an Other that has been inhabiting a different but adjacent space all along.

By arguing that, in *Stranger Things*, "all-American families discover that they're living on the edge of a terrifying wilderness," Rothman traces a connection between the series and Puritan horror, within which the wilderness featured prominently. In the Puritan imagination, as well as in *Stranger Things*, the forest is a contact zone in Marie Louise Pratt's sense, a space where "peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other," invoking "a co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (6). Pratt adds that dynamics of "coercion, racial inequality, and intractable conflict" (6) dominate the contact zone. I would be hard pressed to read the "Demogorgon" or the "Demodogs" in *Stranger Things* as 'racialized' Others, as they are

imaginary, non-human predators of the sci-fi kind. Intractable conflict remains, however, a productive category, as mutual destruction seems to be the only viable mode of interaction with creatures driven by an insatiable hunger for human flesh.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the Indian Other of the captivity narrative was also primarily fictional, and by focusing solely on the Puritan construction of the Native, parallels with Demogorgons become painfully evident. Cotton Mather, for example, lingers on the predatory nature of his Natives, whom he characterizes, with varying degrees of monstrosity, as "raging dragons" (*Magnalia* 90), "Vultures," and "Devourers" (in Strong 72). Rowlandson does the same when she calls her captors "wolves," "ravenous beasts" (4), "roaring lions," and "savage bears" (49). Native bodies thus oscillate between the human and the inhuman. Demogorgons in *Stranger Things* present the same kind of oscillation: their head opens like a blossom, showing multiple rows of teeth, but their bodies, under a thick, dark green skin, have human characteristics. *Stranger Things* does not question for a moment that the encounter with the Other from the Upside Down must end in extermination: a character's attempt to domesticate a "Demodog" cub in season two fails as the creature eats his cat—at which point it becomes clear that the Demodog will not be tamed by any amount of affection or permanence in a domestic environment. This attempt at domestication challenges the condition of "intractable conflict" (Pratt 6), but does not invalidate it. The conviction that the Other is impermeable to civilizing efforts and will remain beastly brings to mind a strategic Puritan skepticism regarding Native converts in the seventeenth century, which obliterated previous Christianizing efforts of missionaries such as John Elliot, Eleazar Wheelock, and the Mayhews. In her canonic *Narrative of Captivity and Restoration* (1682), Mary Rowlandson is famously mistrustful of Native converts. Her accounts of Praying Indians who "sla[y] and mangl[e] in a barbarous manner" (6) and take captives (see 10) like their non-Christian fellows prove that conversion does not translate into the acquisition of a Christian morality. In the same logic, domestication attempts in *Stranger Things* end in failure.

It is also important to mention that Indians, in the Puritan conceptual universe, were vehicles to greater evils: this happens at two levels, both of which find equivalents in *Stranger Things*. The supernatural danger the Natives posed in the Puritan imagination was linked to their function as "devilish instruments of Satan" (Slotkin and Folsom 307). This stereotype reoccurs in numerous early American authors of the like of John Smith, John Bradford, Edward Winslow, and the Mathers, who were convinced that satanism permeated Native American life (see Cave 17).

Rowlandson herself hypothesizes that the Devil may speak to her captors the way God spoke to the Puritans: "they acted as if the devil had told them that they should gain the victory; and now they acted as if the devil had told them they should have a fall" (41). Season one of *Stranger Things* concentrates on the Demogorgon as one, easily identifiable villain, but the villain constellation in season two is more complex and thus more relatable to seventeenth-century representations of the Other as a vehicle to a greater, supernatural danger. The creatures from the Upside Down that attack Hawkins in season two are emanations of what Mike Wheeler and his friends call the "Shadow Monster," a mind-controlling creature who takes possession of Will Byers's body to reach "more and more into Hawkins" (*Stranger Thing*s S1:E5). The creature, made of thick black smoke, is ephemeral and visible only to Will, while the Demodogs are corporeal emissaries who torment the people of Hawkins on its behalf. A parallel emerges, at this point, between the villain constellation in season two of *Stranger Things* and the Natives as Satan's emissaries in the captivity narrative.

A second, derivative danger the Native posed to the English settlers was their alliance with the French—which sparked international and interracial conflict especially during King Philip's War (1675-78) and King William's War (1688-97). Traces of the contempt for the French-Indian alliance emerge in Mather's narrative of Hannah Dustan, where the Indian family that kidnaps Hannah is one of Catholic converts, who, "in Obedience to the Instructions which the French have given them, they would have Prayers in their Family no less than Thrice every Day" (91). Unimpressed, Mather promptly adds that "indeed these Idolaters were like the rest of their whiter Brethren Persecutors" (91). Here, he underscores the supposed vacuity of the Native's Christian conversion and, in the same breath, reiterates that the Native and their "whiter Brethren Persecutors," the French, shared the same level of perversity.

Just as Puritan literature situates Indian maiming and slaughtering within the warfare between contingent empires, the danger posed by Demogorgons in *Stranger Things* extends beyond physical violence and the kidnappings: the collateral outcome of government-funded experimentations, Demogorgons incarnate governmental misconduct and scientific hubris. The woods hide a research center where children with supernatural abilities—like Eleven and her "sister" Eight/Kali (*Stranger Thing*s S02:E08)—are employed in espionage expeditions against Russian communists. It is no coincidence that *Stranger Things* places the research center in the middle of the forest: this choice reinforces the analogy with the genre of the captivity narrative, as the horror of the wilderness expands in concentric circles from the Natives to the French,

and, ultimately, Satan himself. The analogy becomes clear in S1:E3, when Hopper, Hawkins' chief police officer, and two of his colleagues drive to the research center to investigate Will's disappearance. Their derisive diffidence betrays an array of anxieties:

"There she is, the emerald city"

"I heard they make space weapons in there"

"Space weapons?"

"Yeah you know like Reagan's Star Wars"

"I guess we are gonna blow the Ruskies to smithereens." (*Stranger Things* S1:E3)

The officers' suspicion derives primarily from a lack of information about the space they are about to enter, which gives rise to chaotic superstitions: the reference to the Emerald City, capital of L. Frank Baum's fictional land of Oz, grounds the research center in the realm of fantasy. In the following lines the officers' rudimentary understanding of Reagan's anti-communist policies merge with fantasies of "space weapons" and a president about to wage "Star Wars" to blow up "the Ruskies." This interval of comic relief serves two important functions in the logic of my argument. First, it reveals the concentric circles of dangers I have already referred to with regards to Puritan horror. What happens in the woods does not stay in the woods: it reverberates in the spheres of international politics—not the French but the Russians, in this case—and, ultimately, into space. Second, it draws the line between an inside and an outside: it nudges the spectator to align with Hopper's simple-minded but entertaining colleagues, rather than with the mysterious researchers, whom up to this point the spectator associates with monsters, space weapons, and blurry foreign policy. This way, the research center in the woods is an outside within an outside, an unknown connected to vaster unknowns.

A reading of *Stranger Things* through the lens of the Indian captivity narrative would be less plausible if the two captivities of Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and Will (Noah Schnapp) did not play such a prominent role. S1:E1, titled "The Vanishing of Will Byers," announces the captivity theme as the Demogorgon kidnaps Will on his way home one evening. At the same time the series introduces a second captive, Eleven, a girl who escapes from the research center and the ambivalent care of Dr. Brenner (Matthew Modine), whom she calls "papa." Flashbacks of

Eleven's captivity show the repeated physical abuse she undergoes under Brenner's tutelage and her frequent punitive confinements to a barren concrete cell. The spectator soon realizes that this is not the story of one captivity, but of two; and that there are two loci of captivity: the Upside Down and the research facility. Although *Stranger Things* abandons one crucial tenet of the captivity narrative, autobiographical narration, the figure of the captive remains center stage. Will and Eleven embody two oppositional captive types that resonate with the tradition of the captivity narrative: the captive as a powerful intermediary between two worlds, and the captive as a potential traitor, evoking the horror of miscegenation or, in the case of *Stranger Things*, contamination.

Lisa Voigt situates the returned captive in a position of authority within their original communities. Early modern cultures, Voigt argues, did acknowledge "the value of the captive's cross-cultural experience and the expertise derived from it" (1), and often the former captive's amphibious knowledge was seen as a "positive and productive quality" that did not subvert, but rather served the goals of the community (23). Both the researchers who raised Eleven and the Hawkins community treasure the special knowledge she acquired thanks to and during her captivity, and each of them tries to exploit this knowledge for their respective goals, be they espionage, scientific advancement, or survival. Eleven is Voigt's "useful intermediary" (8), able to cross worlds at will, enable contact, and extract information; she speaks from a position of power and authority, mirrored in her friends' perpetual awe and in the adults' circumspect admiration. Seen in this light, Eleven's story fits comfortably in the tradition of female captivity narratives that Elaine Showalter celebrates as "testaments to women's courage, resourcefulness and strength."

Will does not enjoy the same measure of power: after his return, he crosses into the Upside Down suddenly and involuntarily, he is emaciated and in poor health. In season two he is the vehicle through which the "shadow monster" plans his attack on Hawkins. Once it becomes clear that the shadow monster controls Will, his best friend Mike (Finn Wolfhard) tries to comfort him by suggesting he is "like a spy now, a super spy, spying on the shadow monster" (*Stranger Thing*s S2:E5), only to realize a few hours later that it is the monster who spies on them through Will, with lethal consequences. If Eleven embodies the knowledge deriving from "dwelling among them" (Voigt 4), Will is an example of a diametrically different and yet fully contemplated captive position: one that shows the "moral degeneration" supposedly resulting from "contact with a barbarous environment" (Voigt 11). The weekly medical check-ups Will undergoes at the

research facility at the hands of Dr. Owen (Paul Reiser) after his return are reminiscent of the interrogations returned captives had to sustain to prove their religious and cultural integrity (see Voigt 1). Will 'fails' these tests as his health deteriorates, showing the symptoms of a seemingly irreversible contamination. Will's ambiguous allegiances and the suspicion they arouse evoke paradigms of betrayal like that of the treacherous renegade (see Calloway 44) or the paranoia surrounding miscegenation—he is a captive who "lost the vestiges of civilization during […] confinement" (Mancall 1020). I would like to briefly return to Showalter's quote about female captivity memoirs as texts that do not focus on "women's helplessness, sexual vulnerability and terror," but narrate "women's courage, resourcefulness and strength." If the last part describes Eleven's experience, the former is applicable to Will, to whom, as a matter of fact, the show attributes female characteristics. In the season one finale, Will vomits Demagorgon larvae into the sink, suggesting that he has been used as a breeding host. Eleven, on the other hand, is never exposed to the threat of sexual abuse. Moreover, Joyce's exorcism of the shadow monster from Will's body in S2:E9 is strongly reminiscent of William Friedkin's 1973 film *The Exorcist* and its epigones, frequently opposing male exorcists to female possessed bodies. Through this cinematic reference and its gender reversal, *Stranger Things* places Will in a role traditionally played by women. Will's feminization is relevant within the show's dedication to female empowerment as well as its interconnectedness with early captivities. Although men were more likely to be captured by Native tribes, the captive was "most frequently portrayed as female" (Faludi 211). This gender reversal serves the agenda of the captivity narrative in so far as it rationalizes the conquest of the wilderness though a fiction of endangered femininity. In a similar way, Will's feminization and the de-gendering of Eleven—whom other characters mistake as a boy—exacerbate the contrast between female (super)empowerment vis á vis male vulnerability.

Another aspect that enables a reading of *Stranger Things* in the framework of the captivity narrative is the notion of typology. Typology is a rhetorical and interpretive function central to the Puritan conceptual universe. It originates in the Rabbinical tradition and resurfaces in Puritan culture and literature as an "elaborate verbal system that enabled an interpreter to discover biblical forecasts of current events" (Eliot 34); in other words, by finding Biblical antecedents for their quotidian experience, believers could prove the conformity of their life to the Biblical script. From a cultural perspective, typology was a sense-making strategy and coping mechanism that kept the Puritan theological architecture in place in a frontier context where one's life and faith were constantly threatened with dissolution. However, when used within a text, typology is an

intertextual mode that links the present narration to a second text, the Bible, functioning as a template or archetype. Both uses of typology—the cultural and the literary—presuppose participation in a shared textual culture that repeatedly interlinks with one's experience or its representation. The dense network of intertextual or metacinematic references in *Stranger Things* follow the same typological schema.

While adult or teenage characters are reluctant to accept that a demon from another dimension is causing the mysterious events happening in Hawkins, Mike and his friends Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) and Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin) eagerly embrace the supernatural. What enables their seamless transition from a rational to a fantastic worldview is indeed a form of typology: as *Dungeons & Dragons* enthusiasts, Mike and his friends use the popular fantasy role-playing game to navigate the unexpected turns of events. Viewers meet Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will for the first time in S1:E1, in the midst of a heated *D&D* game: their ardor about and commitment to the game suggests that the four boys' world is drenched in the fantastic, which becomes a crucial survival strategy in the face of a supernatural threat. The terminology, scenarios, and characters of *D&D* offer stepping stones to interpret reality: the creature who kidnaps Will immediately becomes a "Demogorgon," after the iconic *D&D* monster; when Eleven flips the board to indicate where Will is being held captive, Dustin compares what will be referred to as the "Upside-Down" to the "Vale of Shadows," and opens his *D&D* guidebook to look up a description of the place. "The Vale of Shadows," he reads, "is a dimension that is a dark reflection, or echo, of our world. It is a place with decay and death, a plane out of phase, a place with monsters. It is right next to you and you don't even see it" (S1:E1). These and numerous other instances show that *D&D* (like other popular texts such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*) functions for Mike and his friends like the Bible for the Puritans, who conceived their sacred text as a functional help in navigating day-to-day issues. Consider, for example, how Theodore Bozeman speaks of the role of the Bible in Puritan everyday life. "Sacred antiquity," he argues, "was not to be conceived historically as a distant, alien, and heterogeneous world. It was to be reentered and experienced. Approached thus, the biblical text became a kind of lens projecting an entire realm of experience over against the everyday" (34). It is hard not to see the similarities between typological schemas in Puritan texts and in *Stranger Things*. For Mike and his friends—as for the Puritans—there is no distinction between text and world: *D&D* as "realm of experience" is regularly "reentered and experienced," regularly "project[ed] […] against the everyday."

Female Fierceness

Female heroism is an essential part of the politics of both the Puritan captivity narrative and *Stranger Things*. Richard Slotkin underlines the centrality of the vulnerable female body for the genre, where "a woman stands passively under the strokes of evil, awaiting rescue" (*Regeneration* 94). Numerous scholars (see Theresa Toulouse or Kathrine O'Hara) have revisited Slotkin's position on female passivity: I have already referred to Showalter's analysis of captivity narratives as statements of women's "courage, resourcefulness and strength." Similarly, Aaron Astor adds that "female fearlessness saved these declining Puritans of the late seventeenth century from utter extinction." *Stranger Things*, too, seems committed to having its female characters save the day, and to awarding them the same level of complexity as their male counterparts. Female leads evolve in the course of season one from a condition of vulnerability to one of empowerment, and season two underscores their transformations. The trigger for this transformation is the encounter with the unmapped wilderness of the Upside Down and its other-than-human inhabitants, and the transformation itself can be read through the prism of the frontier experience. I will take into account the development of two female characters: Will's mother Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder) and Nancy Wheeler (Natalia Dyer), although I consider the latter to be the most revelatory example of the "regeneration through violence," that, according to Slotkin's book by the same name, marks the frontier experience. The two women are not captives, but what is essential for their passage from a subordinate posture to a combative one, as well as for my aim to draw a line between the show and the captivity narrative, is that their affections—a son, a best friend—have been kidnapped and find themselves in mortal danger.

When we first meet Joyce Byers in S1:E1, she is about to drive to work and scrambling for her keys, when she accidentally realizes that her son Will is missing. We witness Joyce trying to make sense of the situation, snapping at her older son Jonathan for not paying enough attention to his brother, and growing ever more panicky. The house's unkempt appearance matches Joyce's disorderly hair and outfit, especially when the editing alternates between Joyce and the wealthier Karen Wheeler (Cara Buono) as the two women talk on the phone. These introductory shots suggest that Joyce is an absentminded mother, not completely in control of her household, as indicated, above all, by the symbolism of the lost keys. The exposure to the supernatural events connected with Will's disappearance—the mysterious phone calls, the going on and off of lightbulbs—prompts a radical change in Joyce's demeanor. This change is

signaled explicitly in S1:E2, when, having witnessed claws trying to break through an unusually elastic wall, she runs out of the house to her car in panic and starts the engine, only to turn it off a moment later, get out of the car, and walk slowly but resolutely back towards her haunted house. Season two capitalizes on Joyce's moment of empowerment, presenting a very similar display of motherly fearlessness in S2:E4, when Joyce stares fiercely at a drawing of the shadow monster who possessed Will, preparing to fight. Joyce plays an active role in the liberation of her son in both seasons: going into the Upside Down with Hopper in the first, and almost single-handedly carrying out an exorcism in the second.

The character of Nancy Wheeler, Mike's sister, adheres even more closely to paradigms of female frontier heroism, as her trajectory takes her from the premises of a damsel in distress to a surprising dexterity with firearms. Derisively nicknamed "princess" by her boyfriend's clique, Nancy debuts as a shy neighborhood girl, learning to navigate the popularity her beauty and Steve Harrington's (Joe Keery) attention bring her. Much can be said about the quiet subversion that lurks under Nancy's reluctant and yet flattered acceptance of her derivative coolness, preparing the ground for her character evolution. After the disappearance of her best friend Barb (Shannon Purser), kidnapped by the Demogorgon, Nancy begins her transformation: worried about Barb and blaming herself for her fate, she befriends Will's introverted brother Jonathan Byers and persuades him to search for their missing friend and brother. On a night expedition to the forest, Nancy crosses a portal to the Upside Down, where she encounters, and escapes, the Demogorgon. Shortly before that night, Nancy walks up on Jonathan as he shoots empty cans. She comments sarcastically on his poor aiming skills—"you're supposed to hit the cans, right?" (*Stranger Things* S1:E5)—takes his gun, aims, and hits a can at the first shot. From that moment on, Nancy's skills with firearms are frequently returned to, especially in season two, which references Nancy's initial empowering moment as it did Joyce's. As the main characters are defending the Byers' house from a Demogorgon attack in S2:E8, Hopper shows Jonathan a rifle and asks with urgency "Can you use this?" Jonathan hesitates, and Nancy promptly interjects: "I can." Next, a panoramic shot shows all of them brandishing their weapons, but lingers on Nancy. This scene evokes what Faludi calls the "inability of […] New World patresfamilias to shield their wives and dependents from 'barbarian' assault" in the realm of the early American captivity, which makes "male protective failures" (211) uncomfortably visible. Not unlike the captivity narrative, *Stranger Things* appears to be the story of "men who couldn't mount a defense and women who could" (222). Similar to Joyce, Nancy exchanges vulnerability for fearlessness not as a consequence of captivity, but as a response to the captivity of a loved

one. This indirect exposure to the contact zone, or the frontier, will lead to direct exposure when the two women enter the Upside Down in search of their son and friend.

The transformative power of the loss of loved ones in the circumstances of captivity is reminiscent of the narrative of Hannah Dustan in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) and, later, of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Dustan Family," published in *The American Magazine for Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* in 1836. In Mather's sketch, a group of Indians irrupt into Hannah Dustan's house as she lies in bed, hardly able to stand after delivering her eighth child, take her and her nurse captive, and kill the newborn. After marching for days through the forest, one night Hannah slays her captors in their sleep, takes their scalps, and escapes with the nurse and a young boy. Omnisciently following Hannah's thoughts as she is about to murder the sleeping Indians, Mather writes that "she thought she was not forbidden by any Law to take away the Life of the Murderers, by whom her Child had been butchered" (91). Here, the emotional distress caused by the killing of her newborn child produces a shift from the law of the Puritan town to the law of the wilderness. Mather's Hannah takes advantage of the legal vacuum ("she was *not* forbidden by *any* law"; my emphasis) that sanctions the legitimacy of revenge and self-justice, becoming herself a killer of her child's killers. Hawthorne, who more than a century later rewrites the Dustan sketch through the lens of his notorious antipathy for Puritan bigotry, mimics Mather's omniscience and reflects on the transformative power of loss in the framework of the frontier: "'Seven,' quoth Mrs. Dustan to herself. 'Eight children have I borne—and where are the seven and where is the eighth!' The thought nerved her arm; and the copper colored babes slept the same dead sleep with their Indian mothers" (397). Again, it is the extraordinary chance of liberatory violence offered by the wilderness that "nerves" Hannah's arm (see also Michelle Burnham, *Captivity and Sentiment* 53). Far from implying that Joyce's and Nancy's resolution to confront their own Others are as racially problematic as Hannah Dustan's, I would still like to suggest that there is a parallel between these women's trajectories from vulnerability to fierceness—one that is facilitated by the loss of a loved one in the violent incidents of captivity. As I anticipated, however, Nancy's evolution reflects the frontier experience more closely, as her trajectory involves a greater measure of violence and a closer contact with the Other, whom she seeks to confront and kill. One can argue that the image of Nancy holding a rifle at the Byers' house, showing the final product of a frontier transformation, has a place in captivity iconography and is reminiscent of the iconic portrait of Mary Rowlandson posing in front of an English settlement, leaning on her rifle, silently

implying that hers is a story of "men who couldn't mount a defense and women who could" (Faludi 222).

Of Contact in Captivity: Conclusion

Captivity narratives are, first and foremost, stories of contact. In Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017) a government research facility captures an aquatic humanoid creature and holds him in a tank, tied to a chain. A cleaning woman discovers the creature, falls in love with him, and helps him escape. The unlikely romance between a South American sea divinity and a working class, disabled woman with a migration background is more than a love-conquers-all tale, it is a story of Otherness and contact, embedded in a narrative of captivity. The film was awarded the Golden Lion at the 74th Venice Film Festival, received thirteen Academy Awards nominations, and won four Academy Awards (best picture, best director, best production design, best original score). Its success—and the proliferation of captivity-themed Hollywood productions I mentioned at the beginning of this article—suggest that the captivity tale remains, up to the present, a pervasive way to imagine contact. Yet, two of the most popular 'captivity narratives' of the twenty-first century, *The Shape of Water* and *Stranger Things*, imagine contact in diametrically opposite ways. What separates *Stranger Things* the most from the captivity narrative is not its transformation of the genre's tropes, but what it leaves out. One of the components of the genre that *Stranger Things* does not adopt—along with, for example, the religious intensity and the autobiographical mode—is its intrinsic ambivalence. The captivity narrative notoriously carries the seeds of its own disruption: it is the bearer of eloquent "dissonances" (Burnham, "Journey" 61) through which human sympathy exceeds the unforgiving rigor of the Puritan prose and undoes its doctrinal premises. Even in its most canonic form, Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative of Captivity and Restoration*, the captivity narrative features protagonists that provide conflicting descriptions of the Other as a devilish brute *and* a kind companion (see Burnham, "Journey" 61). These dissonances leave no trace in *Stranger Things*, where the undeniable monstrosity of the Other and a culture of shared textualities uncritically reinforce the us-versus-them paradigm. *Stranger Things* clings to Puritan exclusionary discourses of community formation with a firmness that would be surprising to Puritans themselves: not only does the small province town of Hawkins unite to face the Other, the outsider, but the poetics of the series inject the audience with a "shot of 80s nostalgia straight to your heart" (Mangan), inviting the spectator to a typologically constructed community that remembers an idealized past.

Similar doubts may be cast on the effectiveness of the series' trajectory of female empowerment. Lisa Coulthard argues that the increasing number of women using violence in cinema and popular culture has concurred to construct a "postvictim" femininity (154) that comfortably fits the gun-wielding heroines of now and then. Coulthard also asks if violence in twenty-first-century films featuring strong female leads may be progressive or regressive. This question becomes relevant for this article as it seems to be both: the iconic rifle-wielding woman is both a manifestation of the growing impact of female figures in film and television as well as that of a cyclical return of frontier imaginaries that feature violence as the main means of self-empowerment.

Despite the energy spent reversing traditional Hollywood gender roles, the series is firmly anchored in overwhelmingly white, monocultural, and anthropocentric paradigms. Female "empowerment through violence," to engage Richard Slotkin's notorious formula, is recruited in favor of a conservative struggle between the Self and the Other, the human and the uncompromisingly monstrous. In New England, 54% of the captured girls between age seven and fifteen, and one third of all women captives, never left their captors' tribe, often marrying within it (see Crutchfield 267). Indian captivity narratives only sporadically tell these stories of radical cultural assimilation, but are consistent in questioning their own premises of cultural incompatibility. With its wealth of hazmat suits, contaminating agents, and toxic atmospheres, *Stranger Things* never suggests that cross-pollination may be anything but repulsive: an endeavor destined to drown in violence.

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