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Imperial Designs: Nationalizing Race in the Barbary Captivity Narratives

Recent work in transnational theory has opened up some exciting interpretative possibilities for key conceptual terms such as nation, race, citizenship, and empire. This interrogation of fixed national boundaries and identities through cultural and theoretical inquiry provides ways of reading race in North America within a broader, global frame. One particular literary genre that opens up the reading of race in North America to a transnational perspective is the Barbary captivity narrative. This genre gained tremendous popularity in the United States between 1785 -1815 on account of the large number of American mercantile ships captured by North African states (due in large part to the fact that the US was no longer protected by the British navy). The Barbary narratives traced the 'miseries and sufferings' of 'white slaves' in North Africa during this moment of early national vulnerability. This reversal of the racial hierarchy that defines the slave/master dynamic in the US offers a critical frame upon the nationalized rhetoric of racial superiority at work in this fledgling democracy. Questions of national security, the 'Moslem,' race, and freedom that accompany the enslavement of Americans abroad serves to mobilize large sections of the public, rallying behind the redemption of these white slaves in Africa -often referred to as "the solitary victims of recent liberty." In fact, the increasingly inflammatory situation between the US and the North African states culminates in the first declaration of war carried out by this new nation: The Tripolitan War (1801-1805). This surge of support for the captive US sailors abroad highlights how the understanding of a nationalized racial identity on the domestic front is often forged within a crucible of international relations of power. My paper will examine how three particular Barbary captivity narratives, by John Foss, William Ray, and Robert Adams, serve to simultaneously reveal and conceal the imperial impulse of nationalizing race within an international context.