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White Woman, Indian Chief: Beatrice Ravenel and the Poetic Consciousness of Captivity

I run the gauntlet like a savage captive,
Torn into ravellings
Not by the spears of men but by the gold pins of the women!
—“The Selfish Woman,” Beatrice Witte Ravenel

WHEN THE CHARLESTON POET BEATRICE WITTE RAVENEL PUBLISHED HER collection of poetry *The Arrow of Lightning* in 1926, she displayed a keen interest in the Carolina Low Country and in the writing of history. Ravenel’s most remembered poems in this collection, the only one published in her lifetime, concern the Yemassee Indians; in these poems, as Susan Donaldson argues, Ravenel’s poetic voice, embodied by the mockingbird, the totem of the Yemassee, becomes “a daring and resourceful thief, a ‘Trick-tongue’ that steals the music of others and deceives its listeners” (184). Associating this mockingbird with her own poetic axis, Ravenel writes, “You are no dryad, / No young squaw of trees; / You are a conjurer. / You sing the songs of all birds with a difference” (*The Arrow* 22). Ravenel uses this voice, one capable of transmutation, to challenge narratives that marginalize or demonize native cultures. The narrator captures the echoes of native history in order “To tell of the passing of nations, / Of the exquisite ruin of coasts, of the silvery change and / the flux of existence” (*The Arrow* 24). In effect, Ravenel frees her subject from mainstream narratives that

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Tom McHaney for his advice on Ravenel’s unpublished poem “Sanute the Chief.” I would also like to thank Noel Polk and an anonymous reader for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay. The Southern Historical Society at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill made this work on Ravenel possible through the John Eugene and Barbara Hilton Cay visiting scholar grant. I am indebted to Laura Clark Brown and her staff who facilitated my research while at the collection. The Wilson Library at UNC and the Houghton Library at Harvard University graciously gave permission to publish selections from the Ravenel and Lowell papers.

justified westward expansion and violence against native peoples.¹ This concern with otherness and the consequences of colonization locate themselves not only in the reemployment of the tribal voice of the Yemassee, but more specifically through the use of tropes originating in the early American captivity narrative, which Ravenel, like many Southern women writers, strategically employs to critique identity borders maintained by white male agendas.

Beatrice Witte Ravenel is a remarkably understudied figure in the canon of the Southern Renaissance, even within the female tradition of the period. Though greeted with positive critical reception, numerous accolades from the Poetry Society of South Carolina, and the attention of renowned authors such as Amy Lowell, her work faded into the margins of the Southern literary landscape until Louis D. Rubin, Jr. attempted to revive interest in her poetry in his 1969 edition titled *The Yemassee Lands*. His introduction to this collection positions Ravenel's work as "better than any other poetry being written in the South . . . outside of Nashville"—quite the compliment in 1960s scholarship to place a woman alongside the Fugitives—and he hails her work as "worthy of lasting attention" (5). Yet in spite of Rubin's attempt, the field has seen only two article-length publications and one dissertation chapter devoted entirely to this important figure. The bulk of her verse remains in relative obscurity and her contribution localized to her participation in the Poetry Society of South Carolina. My goal in this essay is thus two-fold. First, I want to make a case, through a focused study of Ravenel, for looking at the influence of the genre of captivity narratives on the women writers of the modern South. Second, while my interests lie in her use of captivity tropes and images of early America, I contend that there is a need for broader critical engagement with the full range of Ravenel's published and unpublished work.²

Beatrice Witte was born in 1870 to Charles Otto and Charlotte Witte and grew up in Charleston society where she enjoyed numerous advantages. Though her five sisters followed the more typical path of

¹See Donaldson for a discussion of Ravenel's countering of novelist William Gilmore Simms's representation and use of the Yemassee.

²Ravenel's short fiction has received virtually no critical attention in the field. This is partially due to the domestic themes that drive the bulk of her short stories. However, the list of periodicals she appeared in is impressive and several pieces are notable in their exploration of gender and identity. See, for example, "Madonna Mia."

marrying well, Beatrice Witte, after attending the Charleston Female Seminary, pursued courses at the Harvard Annex in Cambridge where she studied widely for five years in literature, history, French, and German philosophy (Worthington 76-77). During this time, she studied with the historian Barrett Wendell and became interested in the Puritan character and early American narratives. While her Cambridge years were prolific—she published in such journals as the *Harvard Monthly*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and the *Harvard Advocate*—Witte returned to Charleston society in 1900 and assumed a more conventional life by marrying Francis Gualdo Ravenel. The couple's only child, Beatrice St. Julien, was born in 1904 (Rubin 11). With her new domestic role, Ravenel published little until the late 1910s, when her poems began appearing in various journals and her fiction earned an essential part of the family's income. By 1920, after the untimely death of her husband, Beatrice Ravenel, like many other literary women, found it financially necessary to publish her work (Rubin 11). Left to provide for her daughter, Ravenel turned out fiction at an astonishing rate in magazines such as *Ainslee's* and *Harper's*, and she wrote editorials for the *Columbia State* newspaper edited by her brother-in-law, William Watts Ball. Though her manuscripts suggest a rebellious poetic voice, it is not astonishing, given the financial necessity driving her, that her "articles in the *Columbia State* expressed opinions compatible with the audience of a white South Carolina newspaper of the period" (Donaldson 182).

After the establishment of the Poetry Society of South Carolina, Ravenel quickly became a respected member who received several prestigious prizes and engaged with visiting artists such as Amy Lowell, with whom she corresponded. The Society not only inspired and helped develop Ravenel's writing through its modernist and imagist influences, but it also played a key role in helping her disseminate her work beyond Charleston. Writing actively until about 1926, Ravenel married Samuel Prioleau Ravenel, a financially successful lawyer and distant relative of her late husband. Freed from financial worry, she published little after this time, but continued to live in Charleston until her death in 1956.

Ravenel's experiences in Charleston and at Radcliffe instilled an ardent sense of historical consciousness in her writing and sparked an interest in colonial history and narrative distortion, especially through tropes of captivity as personified by the Indian-White conflicts that mark early American literature. Her manuscripts reveal a keen, creative

engagement with these tropes and clearly establish that Ravenel was aware of the captivity tradition and of popular sentiments toward Native Americans and wrote directly about paradigms these experiences evoked. For instance, her notes for an unpublished poem centering on a Yemassee chief cite various historical and literary sources on Indian legend from such writers as Williams Gilmore Simms, James Rivers, and Edward McCrady. In a draft of "Some Old Charleston Writers," she refers to numerous early narratives and correspondence about the settling of the area and Native American contacts around Charleston. Her scrapbook contains clippings of several editorial pieces for the *Columbia State* wherein she expresses her thoughts on Indian farming techniques, their hard work, and their literary representations throughout history. Here, she eruditely criticizes Voltaire and Chateaubriand for being enamored with the idea of savagery and for lacking any real knowledge of the Indian (Papers). Ravenel's unpublished papers also include several poems specifically dealing with captivity tropes such as "Sanute the Chief," "The Captive," "Bondwomen," and "To the Body." Her papers contain references, notes, and even chapter copies of her mother-in-law Harriot Horry Ravenel's historical writings, which include an 1896 biography, *Eliza Pinckney*, that was part of a Colonial book series on women in early America, as well as *Charleston, the Place and the People* (1906), a social history of the area.³ In sum, Ravenel was quite knowledgeable about Native American tribes—their history, their traditions, their representation, their importance in regional issues—and they certainly became a dominant theme in some of her most notable published works such as "The Arrow of Lightning," "The Alligator," and "The Yemassee Lands." Her poetic voice in these pieces finds kinship as a woman with native peoples and their historical and cultural confinement, something that for Ravenel was essentially tied to America's Puritan roots.

In a letter to Imagist poet Amy Lowell dated July 29, 1925, Ravenel relates the Puritan character to the modern female aesthetic through a comparison of Lowell and Emily Dickinson. This letter highlights a repressed passion held captive by hegemonic Puritan ideology. Perceiving this as relevant to the plight of modern women, Ravenel writes:

³The biography details Pinckney's experience of and views on the Indian wars of 1759-1761.

When I was at college I remember Professor Barrett Wendell speaking of the apparent coldness and the real passion of the New England Puritan character—a passion which, at the beginning, was expressed in its religious experiences, evidently because no other outlet was allowed it. When I read your poems I thought of his insistence on the subject. That was what you meant, wasn't it—to show the force of life breaking through repression, and commonplace conditions, and the thwarting of the natural emotions that a narrow and hide-bound community exacts? . . .

Emily Dickinson, I suppose, is an example of the same repressed passion and thirst for life. There was a time in my life when one of her poems used to haunt me: –

“The soul asks pleasure first,
And then relief from pain,
And then the little Anodynes
That deaden suffering.”⁴

And so on, until it humbly craves “the liberty to die.” She could say more, compressedly, than anyone except, perhaps, William Blake. (“Dear Amy”)

Ravenel's reference to a “narrow and hide-bound community” in Puritan America translates to her own elite community in Charleston, where her discourse continually navigated between a more conservative, public editorial persona and the subversive poetic sensibilities evidenced in her manuscripts. Evoking Dickinson's implications of the freeing qualities of death on the captive soul, Ravenel aligns her own poetic axis with the language of captivity and the “privilege” or, as Ravenel adequately rephrases it, the liberty to die from “The will of its Inquisitor” (Dickinson 262). This language of confinement takes on added significance for Ravenel when she directly evokes tenets of the genre of the early American captivity narrative in her work.

Scholarship in the field of early American literature has developed over the past few decades a number of innovative critical lenses for examining captivity narratives and the American female experience of confinement. Most prominently, Kathryn Derounian-Stodola brought much-needed attention to female authorship and containment as well as to the function of these narratives in the American female literary imagination. Christopher Castiglia's study changed how scholars view representations of captive female bodies and cultural scripts of gender, race, and agency. Michelle Burnham's examination of interstitial sites and sympathetic responses questions what sentiment authorizes and veils

⁴Ravenel misremembered four words in the poem that do not significantly alter the meaning. The poem is #536 in Johnson's edition of Dickinson's work and begins “The Heart asks Pleasure – first – .”

in these works. While recovery scholarship has made great strides in rethinking approaches to the women of the period, what remains to be done is more work that foregrounds the way modern women engaged with and transformed captivity narratives—a genre so popular among women that editions were “quite literally read to pieces” (VanDerBeets xix). Such work would yield better understanding of how white women writers like Ravenel display and revise captivity tropes to disrupt dominant interpretative traditions. Ultimately, the captivity narrative serves as an ideal genre and trope for revisionist agendas among Southern white women writers like Ravenel who appear to be seizing the subversive potential these narratives accomplished in their own cultural moment.⁵ Forefronting the influence of this genre, my investigation suggests that Beatrice Ravenel took up the subversive potential of this literary tradition to address the concerns of modern women living under restrictive gender and racial codes dictated by Southern womanhood.⁶ As such, tropes of captivity in her work interrogate, and at times undermine, the dynamics of essentializing cultural discourses that represent identity and social hierarchies of race and gender as fixed and unchanging.

As the literary heritage of white women, tales of frontier captivity were one of the first acceptable forms of publication for women writers in America. Derounian-Stodola notes that they were “the first American literary form dominated by women’s experiences as captives, storytellers, writers, and readers” (“Introduction” xi). Despite serving as an acceptable and effective mode of discourse for women, these narratives, as with slave narratives, often were literally and rhetorically constrained by male editors who imposed on them political agendas that sought to contain their veiled displays of female agency and transgression.⁷ Try as

⁵Elizabeth Harrison acknowledges the relevance of the Indian captivity theme in *Female Pastoral* as “an important subplot” in the Southern tradition that was often used by women writers of the South; the influence of captivity narratives is not the focus of this text, which explores alternative pastoral impulses in six Southern women writers of the twentieth century (35).

⁶The historical/cultural tradition and restrictions of the cult of true womanhood in the South has been well documented. See Scott.

⁷The concept of the captive text in early America parallels publishing issues in the Southern Renaissance as major figures experienced textual containment. Evelyn Scott’s publisher excised large sections of her veiled autobiography, *Escapade*, in the printing

they did to contain the fragmenting power of these narratives, the unstable nature of the genre and the unsettling elements of cultural crossing that appear in these texts specifically appealed to American women who had come to question identity and cultural borders defined by white men. They in effect allowed for the construction of a female aesthetic that reinterpreted the frontier experience of the American landscape by centering the liminality of their female experiences as representative of both the culture they were to uphold and the landscape they had to navigate and survive. The experiential appeal of these narratives and the white female domination of the genre continued throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, when the female literary landscape revealed “a particular preoccupation with captors, captives, and the rhetoric of captivity as women explored potential identities and roles in the new century” (Derounian-Stodola, “Captivity” 105). An affinity with the captivity trope, one that often aligns the white woman with the cultural other, continues into the early twentieth century, particularly with the women writers of the South who were still coping with post-reconstruction regional stability, the containment of their own identities under the cult of Southern womanhood, and with a literary landscape dominated by Agrarian men.

Tracking the impulse of the captivity tradition and established cultural sentiments toward Native Americans establishes that the women of the modern South read captivity narratives, were aware of its literary tradition, and wrote directly using paradigms that these experiences evoked. Women like Ravenel converged with this literary heritage and adapted modes of discourse that contain the very elements of resistance and transgression that allow captive voices to challenge the essentializing white discourses on which colonization and imperialism rest. Drawing from this tradition of the early captivity narrative, Ravenel subverts innate constructs of the Southern region and questions the history imposed on the region by the mythologies of those in power. In addition, Ravenel’s work transcends and destabilizes the borders of

phase as he feared lawsuits because of its “immoral” nature and explicit descriptions of the physical experience of birth and breastfeeding. Caroline Gordon, despite her marriage to Allen Tate, faced reframing issues with “The Captive,” because her editor felt the protagonist was “beyond the borders of reality and . . . fiction” for a woman (Baum 451).

Southern literature and culture by investigating conflicts of race and gender in a global context.

Weaving figures within tropes of captivity is an ideal choice on her part precisely because there is nothing distinctly Southern about early American captivities from the region as most of the narratives which characterize the genre took place before there was a South in the social/cultural context we think of today.⁸ While early “Southern” narratives tend to be more secular than eighteenth-century Northern narratives, they advocate similar themes “favoring westward expansion and portraying Native American tribes as an impediment to this” (Weyler 30). Similarly, these narratives were used by historians, novelists, and folklorists to illustrate true American character whose pioneer experience of captivity exemplified individual heroism and foreshadowed the future success of the American nation.⁹

Beatrice Ravenel, writing in the early twentieth century, inverts this historical use of captivity to question, not perpetuate, exceptionalist constructions of American identity and heritage within her published and unpublished poetry. “The Jesuit Missionaries” from *The Arrow of Lightning* and the remarkable unpublished “Sanute the Chief” in her papers at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, demonstrate her concern with the transformative powers of the captivity trope and align Ravenel’s poetic aesthetic with an Indian Chief she positions above biblical patriarchs. Characterized by movement, cultural conflict, and survival, the genre of captivity allows her to bring to the forefront fundamental questions of identity, communal coherence, and historical representation. Simply put, re-writing the captivity tradition exposes both reader and writer to alternative cultural paradigms that “generate forms of critical and subversive agency, both within and outside the text” (Burnham 3) where, for Ravenel, resistant agency is enacted through the potentiality of captivity, not in spite of it.

In the poem “The Jesuit Missionaries,” Ravenel draws on the seventy-odd volumes of the *Jesuit Relations*, which were popularized for an American audience by Francis Parkman’s 1867 *The Jesuits in North*

⁸The most well-known “Southern” captivities are those of Mary Kinnan, Jennie Wiley, Mary Moore, and Frances Scott, and those narratives retold by John Frost.

⁹For a discussion of this concept in nineteenth-century historiography, see Levin.

America in the Seventeenth Century. The Jesuit Order, or Society of Jesus, was founded by Ignatius of Loyola during the Counter Reformation in order to win souls back to the Catholic Church. The Jesuits sent missionaries to Catholic colonies globally, including the French territories in North America. The individuals Ravenel mentions in the third stanza—Brébeuf, Daniel, Raymbault, and Jogues—were ordained priests and missionaries to the Hurons who were captured and savagely tortured by the Mohawks. Even though they had the opportunity for a quick death, the missionaries, trying to save “red” souls while captive, caused a long and brutal series of torture episodes as the white men were publicly beaten and burned. However awful the experience, this increased and continuous torture made their sacrifice for God that much greater as they endured Christ-like suffering and were eventually made saints in the Catholic Church.¹⁰ Stanzas one and two in Ravenel’s poem capture the essence of their mission and captivity:

Like soldiers they took their orders,
Marching to certain glory.
And like soldiers they wrote
From the Front back to Headquarters;
No compromise to flatter a difficult public,
But cogent reports to their General,
Stark awful reality.

Scourged, bitten with fire,
Battling with beasts, with fever, with a novel and strange
demonology;
In the face of long and fastidious torture,
They saved, like feathery, Spring-leaved brands plucked
from the burning,
The souls of red children. (ll 1-14)

The narrator then turns a critical eye on the missionaries’ suffering and historical representation in stanza three by moving from their brutal captivity to the confinement experienced by the wives and children of those who settled the land and remain ignored in historical records:

They were no wise concerned whether the climate
Might pamper a wife, what education

¹⁰For background on the Jesuit missionaries, particularly the representation of their suffering, see Greer.

Might nourish her offspring.
 Traveling light, going alone and farthest,
 They followed the Spirit.
 Others have followed them—
 Makers of books and of records
 Turning to splendid names:
 Brébeuf, Daniel, Raymbault,
 Jogues, first light to the Mohawk.
 There is the fruitful witness—
 “Relations.” “Relations.” “Jesuit Relations.”
 The foot-notes rise up, call them blessed—
 Fathers of American History! (ll 15-28)

By portraying the “Makers of books and records” as the followers of the Jesuits, Ravenel turns an ironic eye on the official renderings of a glorious past where, as she hints through her exaggerated praise, those who construct central narratives are more concerned with hagiography than with historiography. The call for change issued in the last two lines highlights marginalized voices and their displacement through the captivity tradition in order to transgress the boundaries of a historical record viewed as innate, unified, and unchanging. This poem uses the Jesuit captivities to signify the possibilities of multiple discourses and literally calls the footnotes to the center against patriarchal practices exemplified in her sardonic use of “Fathers of American History!” (line 28). The narrator draws attention to the construction of history and its exclusionary tendencies where texts are then, like families—“‘Relations.’ ‘Relations.’ ‘Jesuit Relations.’”—stratified (line 26). Ravenel recognizes such dominant historical discourses as a universal problem existing beyond the boundaries of the South. This poem is not about a particular Southern theme or locale, nor does it employ uniquely Southern images. In essence, Ravenel deploys the historical account to deconstruct more universal gendered and politicized constructs of nation building. It is quite possible that she is responding to their specific use in the hands of historians such as Francis Parkman, with whose work she may have been familiar from her studies in Cambridge.

Parkman, a Harvard-educated historian, uses the captivity of the Jesuits in his 1867 *The Jesuits in North America* to justify England’s cultural dominance over both the Indians and the French. Ravenel would certainly take issue with Parkman’s prejudice against the Indians and his support of their extermination for white progress; yet she echoes his criticism of the efforts of these French missionaries. Parkman writes

that the exploits of these Jesuits “attest the earnestness of their faith and the intensity of their zeal; but it was a zeal bridled, curbed, and ruled by . . . equivocal morality” based on bias and corruption (94, 187). For Parkman, the Jesuits’ enthusiasm, which supposedly came from the inspiration of God, was, in reality, “fostered by all the prestige of royalty and all the patronage of power” (244-45). Thus, the captivities of the Jesuit martyrs “offer Parkman the opportunity to dramatize what he perceived as the cruelty of the Indians and the stupidity of the French” in order to support the concept of “British cultural superiority” (Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 175). Parkman attempts to rewrite Jesuit historiography through his own anti-Catholic and Protestant Anglo-Saxon view of the history of North America. Ravenel, recognizing the metaphoric function of the Jesuit narratives in historical texts such as Parkman’s, employs their legacy to question the essentializing and exclusive philosophy used in historical works that she suggests, to use Parkman’s language, may be corrupt, bigoted, and about power. “The Jesuit Missionaries,” through a direct link to the “Makers of books and of records” followed by a rising up of the “foot-notes” against the “Fathers” of history, reinforces the need for women to question and resist, like the native captors, the exclusive and containing tendencies of a cultural consciousness that marginalizes them.

“Sanute the Chief,” an unpublished, undated poem found in the Ravenel collection at the Southern Historical Society, takes Ravenel’s engagement with the captivity paradigm further, illustrating her direct revision of the genre and American exceptionalism.¹¹ In this poem, Ravenel reflects on the story of Sanute, a Yemassee chief, who warns a local settler, John Fraser (Frasier), of an imminent attack in which he and his family would be taken captive and killed.¹² According to historical accounts, the Yemassee, unhappy with the English settlers,

¹¹Given the poem’s unpublished status, I quote it in its entirety for the reader’s reference at the end of the essay.

¹²William Gilmore Simms’s novel *The Yemassee: A Romance of Carolina* (1835) uses this story of Sanute’s warning of the settlers as part of its plot (99). The historical reference for Sanute’s warning of the settlers most likely arises out of Alexander Hewitt’s *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Colonies of South Carolina and Georgia* (1779) (Gallay 327; see also Hewitt volume 1, 215-17). Ravenel for the most part uses the spelling *Fraser*, but sometime it appears as *Frazer*. *Frasier* is a common spelling in historical documents.

joined with other tribes in accepting an offer from the Spanish, who supplied guns, ammunition, and other necessities for attacking settlements in South Carolina (Gallay 327). Out of friendship, Sanute warns Fraser of the threat of war and, when Fraser resists fleeing, promises that he will kill the family quickly to save them from torture if they refuse to leave. Sanute's legend, appropriated by novelists such as William Gilmore Simms, often becomes part of a larger political message that justifies the annihilation of the Indians to facilitate the white settling of South Carolina.¹³ In Ravenel's hands, Sanute's legend is (re)appropriated from the likes of Simms and embellished with the threat upon the captive white female in order to debunk several national myths including that of the civilized white man and the savage Indian and the sexual threat of the racial Other.

Ravenel narrates Sanute's story by employing the voice of James Adair, a historical white Indian trader who lived among the Southern Amerindians for numerous years. Adair, skilled in Native American affairs and diplomacy, respected their customs and integrity. In a *History of the American Indians* (1775), he attempted to prove that the North American Indians were descended from the lost tribes of Israel (Gallay 351).¹⁴ Ravenel was familiar with Adair's book, as she mentions several of his arguments in the first section of this long poem. What is perhaps most significant about her choice of a narrator is how it positions her own poetic voice as a revisionist historian. By selecting a man who wrote a treatise about the natives as descendants of Israel, she ultimately (re)affirms the Indians' common heritage with the "civil" white man and

¹³Ravenel was familiar with Simms's opus and in a draft manuscript of a piece titled "Some Old Charleston Writers" ironically writes that "when Gilmore Simms, pouring out novel after novel, of very varying importance, achieved 'The Yemassee,' he gave us something that deserves to be remembered. There is no need to speak of the orators or historian. They have their own secure and honored places" (Papers). For Ravenel, what "deserves" to be remembered are the marginalized and silenced voices of the Yemassee.

¹⁴In colonial times, the theory that the American Indians were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel was originally developed as a counter argument to those Europeans who propagated the idea that the Indians were without souls, possessed by demons, and the result of a separate creation. It was most often used by missionaries or religious groups, such as the Quakers, who strove for more peaceful relationships with native populations or who, like the Millennialists, wanted to convert them. Despite its many permutations sect to sect, in sum, it was a tradition used to enoble Native Americans and create a common link with European spirituality.

highlights a common humanity and spirituality. Furthermore, by ventriloquizing his voice, this white female poet radically aligns herself with a liminal transculturated figure described as almost Indian himself. He lived with the tribes so long that he “had caught their way of watchfulness” and his physical appearance and mannerism “had all their quality” (ll 33, 36). Thus, through Adair, she frames her story to dismantle dominating voices.

Adair begins his narration of Sanute’s story by emphasizing that most settlers see Native Americans as barely human and without souls:

. . . . These same folks will speak
 Of Moses and the patriarchs and the prophets
 As elegant and court-bred gentlemen.
 They fancy David some Lord Charles, some governor
 Fresh come from London, quizzing-glass and ruffles,
 And sentiments to match from yon Spectater
 Or French philosophers. (ll 42-47)

The speaker, who has “read their doings,” notes that he sees similar qualities between these patriarchs and Native Americans. In fact, for Adair, some Native Americans are “A deal more cleanly and fastidious / Than those same ancients” (ll 75, 76). To illustrate this point, the speaker strategically contrasts Sanute’s mores concerning the contemplation of captivity to that of a worshiped biblical king in order to invert concepts of the civil and the savage:

. . . . Take you now King David
 And fair Bathsheba, and her man Uriah.
 It’s then I ponder on Sanute the savage
 And Fraser’s fair-haired wife. You hear the story
 And tell me who’s the better gentleman. (ll 76-80)

Like many colonial settlers, John Fraser selected land far from the protected borders of Charles Town “on the skirts of danger. / Too near the Yemassee” where his wife must stay alone while he works (ll 83-84). At first, the narrator describes Sanute’s desire for Fraser’s wife, who with her blonde hair, pale skin, and delicate features “must have proved a sheer amazement / To Indians . . . / Their name for moon” (ll 95-97). Sanute and Mrs. Fraser exchange gifts—doves, deer-meat, cakes, and bannock—and he clandestinely watches her perform her domestic tasks,

night and day, while revealing his desire for Fraser's death. Adair recounts,

Whole nights a play of shadow in the shadows,
Whole days, he watched her ply her homely tasks.
And when she placed upon her good man's head
A bowl, to trim his hair, belike he [Sanute] pondered
How neat a line the tomohawk would find
To guide its circled sweep. . . . (ll 103-06)

While Sanute incessantly watches over Fraser's wife in an attitude of possession and protection, the reader discovers a naïve Fraser whose chief concern is with his acquisition of the land:

. . . . Meanwhile John Frazer
Broke ground, felled saplings, drove his stubborn plow,
And thought that tales of peril from the red man
Were mightily overdrawn. (ll 106-09)

After this comparison, the poem takes a remarkable turn and disrupts the typical trope of the early American captivity tradition in order to subvert dominant myths.

Sanute is "drawn, as sun draws leafings to the easterward, / To fair Bathsheba's cabin" (ll 113-14) where he finds Mrs. Fraser alone with her small child. Singing and unarmed, she would make an easy captive. Yet when Sanute approaches her, she places her child's hand in his and declares them friends and fellow chiefs. This vivid reminder of his role as a leader, and Mrs. Fraser's trust, places Sanute into a crisis of conscience of sorts that results in his fleeing to the woods to grapple with his desire to possess this white woman. Ravenel does something unique here; her Native American figure contemplates the ethical questions surrounding the intersections of gender, desire, and the enactment of dominance.

Sanute first rationalizes taking Fraser's wife captive for his pleasure. He notes that he is chief and has the dominion to do it. In addition, his experience reveals, as does Ravenel's as a reader of the captivity genre, that young women like Mrs. Fraser could acculturate: "He knew besides how soon a captive squaw / Forgot her people and her husband's wigwam, / And set her smiles to please her new-found lord" (ll 143-45). Yet, despite her susceptibility to easy capture, Ravenel's Sanute refuses

to act on selfish impulse. Instead, the poem contemplates the philosophical questions concerning what truly makes a king:

What makes a king, I ask you? Hardly gold
Or pompous trappings. Power over humans—
That's all that counts. It's being bold to say,
"Yon man's between my glory and the sunlight,
So blot him out"; or, "yon enticing female
Could make me free of trouble and harassment
Of life one hour. To my tent with her."
(For that's the use of woman; she's escape,
Illusion of release). That's why Barbarians
Clad mostly in fantastic nakedness,
Of painted stripes, fawn-trotters, leather fringes,
Assume the carriage of your emperor,
Having dominion's one essential—power. (ll 128-40)

Here the poem highlights Sanute's nature through his self-control and refusal to abuse power. Ravenel, in a sharp return to the biblical David, ironically concludes this section: "We know how David acted" (line 147). David took a married Bathsheba for himself after watching her bathe from his roof. When the violation results in pregnancy, he murders her husband to cover up the act, and Bathsheba is coerced into marrying the very man who committed violence against her. This historical parallel is not lost on the reader as Ravenel's Sanute takes a noble path and becomes "a figure to be honored and emulated as one who lives much closer to nature and to his true nature" (Worthington 88).

While some may criticize Ravenel for romanticizing Sanute, her portrayal of this figure counters common views of native peoples and directly challenges cultural scripts that romanticize the biblical David by downplaying his transgressions against Bathsheba.¹⁵ These representations go against scriptural evidence and often characterize

¹⁵Some critics may also criticize Ravenel for her employment of Adair's voice and what they perceive to be the marginalization of the voices of Sanute and Mrs. Fraser, who both have few instances of direct speech in the poem. While I recognize the complexities here from feminist and multi-cultural angles, Adair's voice allowed Ravenel to align her own poetic sensibilities with a liminal figure who could navigate multiple cultures and construct—as Adair did in *History of the American Indians*—cultural narratives. His construction of historical scripts is in line with the poet's fore-fronting of the marginalized and silenced.

Bathsheba as a cunning woman who strategically engineers a union with the King.¹⁶ Such interpretations in male dominated cultures hold women “responsible for men’s lust,” whereas David is fundamentally “a sexual predator” and “murderer” (Davis). In this sense, Ravenel does not romanticize Sanute in that he becomes, like Lydia Maria Child’s Indian Chief Hobomok, more white and, thus, more civil, but rather in how he rejects a colonizing impulse like David’s.¹⁷ Rather than following the literary impulse of civilizing the “savage” or alternatively making him vanish into the wilderness, Ravenel raises Sanute’s ethical stature above revered Western patriarchs. She allows him to reappear from the woods with a solution that *removes* Mrs. Fraser from an economy of sexual desire by adopting her as his Indian sister and as his spiritual and racial equal. Resisting her easy capture, Sanute makes the object he desires holy through an Indian water ritual:

And, gently as a cowering mist that brushes
The vine-leaves on a trellis, over and over,
And touching, barely touches, thus he bathed
With that charmed water both her moon-white hands,
Her countenance, the column of her throat;
Then, rising from his knees, in his own speech
He said, “You are my sister. I must guard you,
Even from myself.”

And thus he set apart
The woman, made of her a fountain sealed.
(Holy, beloved, are one word in their language.)
He joined her to him by a seperateness
As close as marriage, which he might not cross.
He made her holy and forbidden to him.
Forever. (ll 158-72)

Now declared his sister and made sacred, she is not only safe from captivity, but her interests, and Ravenel’s poetic axis, are directly aligned with Sanute’s. They become akin in a way that sets them apart from the

¹⁶See Garsiel for an overview of contemporary religious debate and scriptural interpretations of these figures from II Samuel 11.

¹⁷In Child’s book, the Indian Chief Hobomok is married to and has a child with a white woman, but he withdraws into the forest to make her union with the white Charles Brown possible. His nobility is predicated on his ability to abdicate power to white ideology.

colonizing impulse represented by David and John Fraser, who remains concerned only with tilling the land. For despite being forewarned of an impending Indian attack, Fraser ignores his family's safety and laughs at the suggestion that he leave his ripe crops "all ready to be gathered" (line 176). Sanute promises to kill Fraser rather than see him tortured, but it is only after his wife's pleading for their child that Fraser agrees to leave. While Sanute indeed threatens Fraser's life, his pledge demonstrates his capacity for mercy in that he vows to protect Fraser from torture. His actions also stand in juxtaposition to those of Fraser who would have risked his wife's life to collect his property. Ironically, once Mrs. Fraser removes out of the forest back into the safety of the white settlement, she dies in childbirth and the Indians are brutally defeated. While the two never meet again, Sanute continues to see a connection between himself and the white woman; his discourse about her is "poetry" (line 205). Accordingly, Ravenel concludes, "And certainly / He was a gentleman, this chief Sanute" (ll 215-16).

Ravenel's "Sanute" strategically employs the potentiality of captivity in order to critique a Southern past dominated by white male agendas that demonize the racial Other in contrast to the humanity of the settlers. Her contemplation of captivity gives depth, complexity, and moral character to this Yemassee chief who shows more philosophical thought and reason than does the biblical David. Furthermore, the cultural crossing that takes place in the poem via the water rite bridges the gap between the white woman and the racial Other. Ravenel resists *fixed* racial markers as Mrs. Fraser becomes Sanute's sister, "a fountain sealed," effectively debunking the sexual threat of the man of color often used to align the interests of women with white men.¹⁸ The contrast between Sanute's and David's actions further emphasizes the need for society to look with a critical eye within its own culture where captivities abound as men wield power over women and minorities.

Returning briefly to my epigraph, Ravenel's employment of the captivity tradition in "The Selfish Woman" addresses the confinement that Southern women continued to face under the legacy of Southern womanhood. The external captivity trope highlights an internal captivity that ultimately results in death of the self. The narrator refuses

¹⁸For a full discussion of the Southern rape complex and its use as a mode of sexual and racial suppression, see Hall.

to authorize the conventional Southern lady; instead, images of captivity allow her to disavow it:

Love me or leave me alone.
 You shall no longer cling about my lap,
 Your love that will not love!
 Your separateness that will not go away!
 If you were gone
 I could be all creation in myself.
 But not with you to lead me and frustrate me—
 Your hesitations, your half-tones, your cowardice.
 I run the gauntlet like a savage captive,
 Torn into ravellings
 Not by the spears of men but by the gold pins of the women!
 (*The Yemassee* 90)

This poem might be misunderstood if it were not for the employment of a captivity rite—running the gauntlet—which most often served as an initiation rite in which captives were forced to pass through a line of villagers. Here, however, Ravenel’s speaker is not suffering through a brutal initiation by Indians. She is struck, “torn into ravellings”—perhaps a play on her own name and position—by the initiation into Southern womanhood. The poem poignantly addresses the lasting proliferation of the myth of Southern womanhood that held women hostage as sacrificial, constantly-serving moral exemplars in the South. Drawing from the traditions of captivity fractures these myths by revealing the internal captivity such a system imposed on women. For the speaker, the artifice, the veneer, becomes a torment that she longs to shed. Ravenel makes visible the separateness experienced so deeply that, as Anne Goodwyn Jones argues, it cost women their identities—the individual sense of self (4).

In sum, Beatrice Witte Ravenel employs captivity in her poetry to interrogate the borders of identity and history. By recognizing the parallels between the captivity tradition and her own region, and social, cultural status, Ravenel scrutinizes traditional views of women, race, and community. Her work draws attention to (and simultaneously subverts) how the bodies of captives are used to manufacture regional and national power and cohesion, and thus demonstrates “the ideological investments in maintaining . . . [the] body as an object of cultural exchange” (Castiglia 10). This discursive crossing allowed through literary traditions of captivity provides Ravenel with revisionary possibilities concerning

cultural scripts. In so doing, captive bodies resist cultural framing by concurrently revealing and resisting the inscription process. In other words, she reveals their use as subjects by focusing on the marginalized and, therefore, allows their meaning to be renegotiated as a consciousness-raising process. Her work thus deserves more critical inquiry and “not merely for celebrating the low country, but for transfiguring it” (Worthington 93).

Ravenel is no exception with her fascination with Native Americans and tropes of captivity; she is merely overlooked. Well known, prolific figures of the Southern Renaissance such as Ellen Glasgow, Caroline Gordon, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts, to name a few, use the metaphoric potentiality of the captivity narrative to align the female authorial voice with the forest and Native Americans. In doing so, they do not merely model the precursor texts but rather revise them to challenge cultural forces and myth in an attempt to change the “substructure [of such tales] from a defense of an oligarchic order” to an indictment of regional codes that continually kept women, those of color, and the female authorial voice on the margins of social power structures (Harrison 44). Examining the historical consciousness of the voices of modern Southern women as literary inheritors of a specific and highly politicized white female writing and publishing tradition—the early American Indian captivity narrative—we can better understand their own conception of white womanhood in the American South and the process of challenging regional scripts of identity. By perceiving the political potency of the captivity narrative, women writers used its metaphoric potentiality to underscore the subversive actions of women, their strength and survival skills, and their plot within a community of captives, to use Castiglia’s language, in the roles allotted them in the southern region.

SANUTE THE CHIEF¹⁹
1715

There came this hour in every mortal day
In Fisher's Tavern by the waterfront.

Reverberations of the tides slapped in;
Reflections of the dazzling crests of waves
Made half the dusky walls a looking-glass 5
To dance in, heaving green and watery gold,
Until the humming taproom floated strange
As undersea, and men cast queasy glances
At strangers' faces, too like mariners
New-drowned, ghost-drifting through tobacco smoke. 10

Just after sunset, just as though the sun
Had left behind a Red-man's choking curse.

But some days, from the snug red-curtained parlour
Where rum out-trailed a labyrinth of smells,
A deeper boom dispersed these grisly thoughts 15
And brought a homeliness about the air.
Mine host would smile, as at a seasoned cause
For humor. "Mr. James Adair, the trader
Among the Indians, rode this early morning
Along the south plantations into Charles Town." 20

The answering humorous twinkle never failed him:
Your deep-sea captains, planters, gentlemen
Of the Assembly, all would smile and twist
A knowing eyebrow; none the less, might linger
Till half the night was gone, when James Adair, 25
(Enough imbibed but not a drop too much)
Would pay his own score thriftily, but pour
A vintage from his memory without measure
As long as one would drink.

He had lived so long 30
Among the tribes, had paced their villages,
Savannahs, Tuscaroras, Yemmassees,

¹⁹Two drafts of this poem along with textual notes appear in the Ravenel manuscript collection at the Southern Historical Collection (box 3 folder 18). My transcription is of draft two, which incorporates line edits from draft one as well as further line edits and strikethroughs. Spelling mistakes and textual emphases are Ravenel's own. For example, see "horsely" and "seperateness" (ll. 150, 169). I have added line numbers for the reader's reference.

That he had caught their way of watchfulness
Disguised as all-sufficient proud detachment.
The high-hooked nose, the sun-tanned coppery cheek-bones 35
Had all their quality; the sweeping gesture
Magnificent but sparse; yes everything—
Except their silence.

“Well, I mind Sanute.

Some folks will tell you red men have no souls, 40
Are barely human. These same folks will speak
Of Moses and the patriarchs and the prophets
As elegant and court-bred gentlemen.
They fancy David some Lord Charles, some governor
Fresh come from London, quizzing-glass and ruffles, 45
And sentiments to match from yon Spectater
Or French philosophers. I read their doings
And see a good deal of the Indian in them.
You know my mind. Laugh, gentlemen, yes, laugh.
Some day I’ll write a book and laughter’ll cease. 50
I swear I know if I know anything
These red men are descended from the tribes
That Israel lost! I prove it by their language,
Their feasts, their ritual garments, even the name,
The secret name they give their Manitou. 55
I’ve seen what I have seen. They know their value,
A chosen and a loved peculiar people.
They call their tribes by names that Israel used
To call their cherub-standards. And the times
For kindling new-born fire are the same. 60
I’ve marked upon their chief sanhedria
(One well may name them so), in poplar wood
White painted, eagles, and upon their stands
A panther carved, the nearest beast they know
To Judah’s lion. And their prophets wear 65
Such trappings Aaron’s sons might recognize.
I’ve seen it all. When I remember Samuel
A-hacking Agag, sir, before the Lord,
I see him in a crest of sacred swan-plume,
A conch-shell breastplate and a red-lined mantle, 70
His tomohawk face turned devil in the gleam
Of bonfires lit for torture. On their mound
They’ve sacrificed to God a thousand years
At Pocotaligo. I’ve known some Indians
A deal more cleanly and fastidious 75
Than those same ancients. Take you now King David
And fair Bathsheba, and her man Uriah.
It’s then I ponder on Sanute the savage
And Fraser’s fair-haired wife. You hear the story

All day he grappled with them. He, a chief,
 What makes a king, I ask you? Hardly gold
 Or pompous trappings. Power over humans—
 That's all that counts. It's being bold to say, 130
 "Yon man's between my glory and the sunlight,
 So blot him out"; or, "yon enticing female
 Could make me free of trouble and harassment
 Of life one hour. To my tent with her."
 (For that's the use of woman; she's escape, 135
 Illusion of release). That's why Barbarians
 Clad mostly in fantastic nakedness,
 Of painted stripes, fawn-trotters, leather fringes,
 Assume the carriage of your emperor,
 Having dominion's one essential—power. 140

God knows what held his hand, Sanute, the chief,—
 His fighting-tail was clear five hundred men.
 He knew besides how soon a captive squaw
 Forgot her people and her husband's wigwam,
 And set her smiles²⁰ to please her new-found lord. 145
 Who taught him this strange woman would be different?
 We know how David acted.

Listen then.

That night he came once more, with sundry herbs
 Grasped in his fist. He uttered horsely, "Water." 150
 She gave him always what he asked for thus,
 Because he was a chief, he had supposed.
 But catching now the smile in her blue eyes
 He knew she found him a demanding child
 One humors. Even then he bowed his spirit 155
 To ask her good man's leave. He then cast the herbs
 Upon the surface of the earthen bowl,
 And, gently as a cowering mist that brushes
 The vine-leaves on a trellis, over and over,
 And touching, barely touches, thus he bathed 160
 With that charmed water both her moon-white hands,
 Her countenance, the column of her throat;
 Then, rising from his knees, in his own speech
 He said, "You are my sister. I must guard you,
 Even from myself." 165

And thus he set apart
 The woman, made of her a fountain sealed.

²⁰"Sails" is handwritten above "smiles." There are no marks to indicate which word was her final intent.

(Holy, beloved, are one word in their language.)
 He joined her to him by a seperateness
 As close as marriage, which he might not cross. 170
 He made her holy and forbidden to him,
 Forever.

Not so many moons went by
 Before he came again and bade them flee
 From fearful wrath to come. John Fraser laughed. 175
 What, leave his crop, all ready to be gathered,
 His fruit trees and his porkers? Then Sanute
 Cried out the lightning spitting from the cloud:
 "The war-belts come. The bloody stick goes forth
 When that red sun falls down into the water. 180
 My people take the war-path. Cherokees,
 And Creeks all take the war-path. Every white man
 Will die. This only can I promise you.
 Before the young men bind you to the stake,
 And thrust the lightwood splinter in your eyeballs, 185
 Sanute will kill you swiftly—only this!"
 Then, by the woman's terror for her child
 Compelled, John Fraser took the chief's canoe;
 And so they brought to Charles Town first of all
 The warning of that deadliest war that tore 190
 The province, wiping out the settlements
 Within ten miles of loopholed tabby walls.
 That held the town. You know that ghastly tale
 Of how we broke the Yemassee. No need
 To jog your memories yet. They're raw with it. 195

He never saw the woman's face again, —
 Sanute. He never heard, most like,
 He might have taken her to him
 As David took Bathsheba. How I know
 The tale is true? Because he spoke, once only, 200
 Of this to me. He knew not where she walked,
 Beside what streams, but knew she was not dead.
 He said, "The hunter makes his path by stars;
 And every night some stars have climbed the hill
 Of clouds." (They talk this poetry way, the chiefs, 205
 As naturally as we talk blasphemy).
 'If she had died all stars would stop, as I
 Would stand, as quiet as a hard-held breath,
 To see her pass across the Bridge of Stars.'

"I didn't tell him she was gone, years gone— 210
 In childbirth of her second young one. No.
 Your gentleman has gifts in being hurt

That thick-skinned folk like we can scarce conceive—
Genius in suffering.

And certainly
He was a gentleman, this chief Sanute.”

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(Papers)

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