‘Barbary’ Mahometans in Early American Propaganda: A Critical Analysis of John Foss’s Captivity Account

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Abstract
This article analyzes the first immigrating images of the North African ‘Mahometan’ in the American imagination via John Foss’s (1798) captivity account. It examines the agenda-led discourses and ‘othering’ images establishing the ideological split between the notion of the American “us” and the Muslim “them” through various discursive associations in John Foss’s (1798) *A journal, of the captivity and sufferings of John Foss; several years a prisoner at Algiers: together with some account of the treatment of Christian slaves when sick:-- and observations of the manners and customs of the Algerines.* The account’s embedded myths, stereotypes, and clichés served as the ‘West’s’ first impression of the Muslim ‘corsair’; they rendered more vivid the perceived aberration of the ‘Orient;’ and they reinforced the symbolism of strength and glory forcefully associated with the newly nascent America. The article further discusses the breadth of circulation and propagation of the constructed ‘West-Orient’ disparity and the celebration of the confrontation with the ‘othered’ enemy. American venues—e.g. museums, galleries, and circuses—as well as works of art—e.g. novels, paintings, and cartoons—constituted a major accomplice in the dissemination of the propaganda in the American public space.

*Keywords:* captivity accounts, Barbary States, North African corsairs, Islamophobia, propaganda, othering

Introduction

Following its eventual detachment from the colonial grip of the British Empire in 1776, the United States of America—newly nascent and keen—engaged in maritime activities, leading to unfriendly encounters in an unprotected region in the world—North Africa’s shores (Baepler, 2004). During the eighteenth century, North African region witnessed heated encounters between Americans, who had lost protection from British Royal Navy guaranteed via Britain's treaties with North Africa (Freeman, 2015), and the locals, hence a war framed in captivity account history as ‘Westerners’ versus North Africans, who are referred to in the narratives’ discourse as ‘Barbarians,’ ‘moors,’ ‘corsairs’ or simply as ‘Mahometans,’ in reference to prophet Mahomet. The American accounts were characterized by exotic descriptions of the North African ‘other,’ and therefore the discursive construction and introduction of North African ‘Mahometans’ into the American public space. Islam and Muslims were beginning to be portrayed negatively and framed in the ‘Oriental’ framework (Moten, 2015). The encounters led to North Africans seizing European and American ships during the maritime wars and to the enslaving of Europeans and Americans with the possibility of redemption via ransom from Western governments (Sears, 2012)—an activity that had been long standing for centuries from Crusades on. In 1793, John Foss, an American sailor, set off to Cadiz from Baltimore. He was captured off the coast of Algiers, in which he was enslaved for five years until 1798, the year he was redeemed by the United States of America with a few fellow Americans. In his account, he reports on every spec of his life as a captive in North Africa (Berman, 2007; Sears, 2012). Berman (2007) states:

Although the Barbary captivity narrative in English existed for more than three centuries, it caught the attention of United States readers primarily during the first half of the nineteenth century. Between John Foss’s 1798 narrative and the numerous printings of James Riley’s 1817 account, . . . American publishers issued over a hundred American Barbary captivity editions. (p. 31)

One of the pervasive labels referenced throughout Foss’s (1798) account is ‘barbary’ and ‘barbarian.’ ‘Barbary’ referred originally to Berbers—the indigenous people of North Africa, particularly in Kingdom of Morocco and the Ottoman regencies like Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. 'Barbary states' was used by the British as a blanket term in reference to North Africa between 1520 and 1830 (Matar, 2007; Muller, 2017) and found root in its indigenous Berber inhabitants, or simply ‘Berbers,’ or ‘Berebbers’ (Sumner, 1853). It was used exclusively to mark the North African locals, or the Maghreb—a zone of contact where cultures met, clashed, and grappled in dichotomous relationships of domination and subordination (Pratt, 1991 as cited in Harris, 2016). The term has potential roots in the Roman term Barbara, which signifies ‘Barbarian’ (Hall, Leakey & Shields, 2003). The Berbers constituted a part of North Africa’s inhabitants and were mountain dwellers and pastoralists (Ferguson 2014). Living in North Africa with Arabs, sub-saharan Africans, and others led to the conflation of the existing races in the region, leading to one blanket
term—barbarian or Moor or Mahometan—referenced across the narratives. This confusion and conflation of ethnicities has also resulted in inaccurate unscientific descriptions. In this regard, Tinniswood (2011) states:

Every follower of Islam was a Turk, every Turk a follower of Islam. Moors were “barbarians,” both in the sense that they were Berbers and hence came from Barbary, and more contemptuously because they were beyond the boundaries of Christian civilization (p. 50).

The term ‘Barbary’ has also been seen in light of its cognate ‘barbarianism,’ which Farias (1985) interprets as a categorical label denoting Africans’ reluctance to communication and refusal to engage in commerce. The term is interpreted and explained in a way that speaks to the author’s Orientalism-channeled opinion. As a form of communication, Barbary is also seen to derive from a derogatory Grecolatin term denoting a “unintelligible foreign outsider” (Davis, 2016, p. 4). Other takes substantiating the idea of unintelligibility include Ben Rejeb’s (1981) view about seventh century Arabs using the term ‘berbera’ «(to number) in reference to the natives’ unintelligible language” (p. 4). The unintelligible character of the language characterizing the ‘western’ text was a common remark among other researchers who ascribed the term ‘Barbary’ or ‘Berber’ to “a jumble of unintelligible cries” (1983, p. elxx) and also to a mere “mixture of unintelligible noises applied for example to the roaring of a lion” (Fage, 1978, p. 107). This article borrows Historian Spellberg’s (2013) take on the term, which he equates to ‘otherness’ and absence of civilization. This definition expresses the article’s interpretation of the surrounding discourse in John Foss’s (1798) account (2013 as cited in Davis, 2016).

As a hegemonic discourse hinging on the superposed disparities between the constructed ‘Orient’ and the ‘west,’ Orientalism spreads on the ground of the ‘West’s’ discursively dictated superiority over the east in a dialectic context. This superiority is not limited to military power; it also lies in the ‘west’ presenting itself as a reference point, which manifests in its prescriptive nature vis-à-vis the ‘Orient.’ Orientalism has further allowed for the ‘west’ existing in a dominant position to describe and prescribe the way the ‘Orient’ must be represented and “dealt with” (Said, 1978, p. 3). It teaches about the ‘Orient,’ settles it, and rules over it. Emanating from the ‘west,’ the descriptive image of the East, or as reduced in the Orientalist discourse as the ‘Orient,’ comes as objective and legitimate (Said, 1978). Similarly, granting authority to the west to determine how the ‘Orient’ is thought about, the latter “itself becomes a creation of orientalism” (Sayyid, 2003, p. 33). These images are reflections of the west’s fantasies of its ‘Other,’ which Said (1978) describes as strong orientalism—rather than distorting a real ‘Orient’ by Western scholars (Jamil, 2003). The conflation of ‘Muslim’ with ‘Arab’ and other ethnicities existing in “Barbary states” delineates how these different labels have been formed into one homogenous doubled effect rising from both being Muslim, from being Arab, from being barbarian, and the ensuing negative representations and meanings associated (Samhan, 1999). The detrimental conflation is not recent but finds extensions, if not roots, in the discursive facet of the Atlantic maritime wars between North Africans and the ‘West.’ These wars crossed the sea into the public space, carrying between their lines west-serving propaganda.
This article analyzes the first immigrating images of the Muslim in John Foss’s (1798) *A journal, of the captivity and sufferings of John Foss; several years a prisoner at Algiers: together with some account of the treatment of Christian slaves when sick:-- and observations of the manners and customs of the Algerines.* Foss’s narrative served as America’s first impression of North African ‘Mahometans’ and sailed into the American public space. The images infusing Foss’s narrative contributed to the construction of a more vivid image of the new ‘other’ and strengthened the image of power and glory associated with young United States of America. The article also explores the work of American populist arts and venues in channeling the newly introduced blue print of the Muslim ‘other.’

**John Foss’s images of the Muslim**

Similarly to captivity accounts of Jonathan Cowerdy (1803), William Ray (1803), Maria Martin (1806), Robert Adams (1816), Eliza Bradley (1818), Gee Joshua (1680-1696), Foss’s served as West’s first impression of ‘barbary states’ and ‘Mahometans.’ The discourses surrounding the texts had a twofold effect; they highlighted the ‘Orient’ and its clichés associated and strengthened the superposed glorious attribute ascribed to America (Sutton, 2009). The traveling blueprint image of North Africa and its Muslim inhabitants was key in setting the ideological split between ‘westerners’ and the Muslim ‘other,’ presenting binary relationships like ‘noble Protestantism’ and ‘uncivilized Mahometanism,’ etc. (Lambert, 2005). The description of the Arabs and Muslims of North Africa, channeled through the orientalist prism, borrows the notion of civilization as being the ground on which differ the world of America and that of North Africa. The account also helped sketch a guide for civilized America and Americans not to be: “the Muslim world was a lesson for Americans in what not to do, in how not to construct a state, encourage commerce, or form families” (Alison, 2010, p. XVII).

One of the pervasive myths referenced throughout captivity account was the ‘other’ ‘Mahometans’ being inherently different and unable to change. Foss’s (1798) excerpt notes describes, “the Turks are a well built robust people, their complexion not unlike Americans, tho’ somewhat larger, but their dress, and long beards, make them appear more like monsters than human beings” (p. 74). The passage sketches an inherently "monstrous" Turk, who is also a ‘Mahometan’ for the shared faith. Foss (1798) sets the criteria for what qualifies as a ‘human being,’ which seems to hinge upon the American as the quintessential model. Those who do not feature Anglo-centric traits are demoted to the subcategory of monsters. In similar excerpts, People are shelved against the superiority/inferiority caliber, creating a reductionist stature-based classification that uncovers the writer’s attitudes towards the local people rather than introduces them to the reader. This dehumanization of North Africans and the Orientalist ideas are as sharply blatant as those depicted in *The Boston Gazette* (1786, as cited in Null 2008). Similarly, Joseph Pitts’ (Maundrell & Pitts, 1817) account shows how young Pitts’ words reflected his hypercritical attitude towards an approaching North African ship, “the enemy seemed to me as monstrous ravenous creatures, which made me cry out ‘Oh Master! I am afraid they will kill us and eat us!’” (p. 303). The excerpt contributes to the perception repertoire on the ‘othered’ world through the newly introduced word: cannibalism. The condemnatory statement transferred the same hyperbolic fear into the American mind as the one experienced at the sight of the approaching vessel. Although Joseph Pitts was clearly not a victim of cannibalism, the excerpt was kept to help instill the image of ‘cannibalism’ into the public’s perception of the Muslim.
Religion, too, sets a pillar around which the two supposed ‘worlds’ compare and contrast. The title *A journal, of the captivity and sufferings of John Foss; several years a prisoner at Algiers: together with some account of the treatment of Christian slaves when sick:-- and observations of the manners and customs of the Algerines*, presents the narrative from the prism of religion, identifying the writer with Christianity. This identification sets a context of enmity and clash between Christianity and Islam and places religion as a backdrop against which the Muslim treatments of Christian slaves are interpreted. The narratives presented images of lawless against lawful, Islam against Protestantism, and other binary oppositions that sought to glorify the ‘West’ to the detriment of what stands in the opposite side (Lambert, 2005). Another excerpt introducing the disparities between Americans and their ‘other’ counterpart, though this time via a different prism—religion—highlights the Muslim enmity towards Christians and reads, “they abominate the very name of and cultivate the most inveterate hatred against Christians, and are continually like ravenous wolves seeking means to destroy them” (Foss, 1798, p. 65).

Foss’ (1978) account further emphasizes the gap between the religions of the two ‘worlds.’ What colonial America was characterized with was the long ideological schism between Christianity and Islam and the framing of the duality as a battle between Christian knights and Islamic pirates, which was also seen as a war between cross and crescent (Blassingame 1981; Matar 1999). Books on North African ‘corsairs’ and their confrontation with American and European ‘noblemen’ presented Arabs as vowed Islamic pirates belonging in the medieval autocracy and whose beliefs were limited within the terrifying piratical confines. The re-publications further consolidated the anti-Christian violence and the danger of the Muslims (MaClean & Matar, 2011). The Muslims were portrayed as inherently spiteful of Christians the present account. Recalling a man who converted into Islam, Foss (1798) writes:

One of the crew (through a mistaken zeal,) expressed an inclination of embracing the Mahometan religion (...) On his renouncing the Christian religion, for that of Mahomet, the principal men in the city, made him a present of 5,000 Algerine Sequins. He had not continued above 4 months, in this benighted superstition; before his conscience smote him, and he repented of his folly, for having abandoned the true worship of Jesus Christ, and having embraced that of the imposter Mahomet (p. 40).

To Foss, depicting Muslims not only as uncivilized, barbarian moors but also as adhering to a false superstitious religion led by an imposter presents more than a lived experienced in North Africa; he openly engages in defining the religion of North Africans derogatorily and associating it with falseness and evil. “Mistaken zeal” also places emphasis on the unwise decision of the crewman who expressed his wish to convert into the religion of Islam and uncovers the writer’s opinion about Islam being the wrong choice. Defining Islam as a superstition guided by an imposter, thereby downgrading the religious symbols, goes in parallel with the ideological endeavor of creating the ‘other’ who is inherently evil and uncivilized. In the same vein, Foss (1798) adds: “Mahomet has taught them in his alcoran (...) that all of his faith who are slain fighting against the Christians, immediately enter into Paradise in triumph (p. 65).”
Adjusting his experience to the religion of North Africans, Foss (1798) places the prophet’s religion as a violent ‘other’ against the West’s religion—Christianity—leaving the reverse values for the latter. The quotation sets the ground for the associations of Muslim/Islam with violence. In a statement reinforcing the tenet about North African violence, Foss (1798) writes, “such is the gross indignation the Mahometans, bear toward the Jewish religion, that a Turk may with impunity, (if he flees to a Marabout Mosque, or pay a small penalty,) murder ten of them [Jews]” (p. 40). He adds, “my readers ought to be informed that these merciless Barbarians are taught by their religion to treat the Christian Captives with unexampled cruelty, and that in so doing they do God service!” (p. 5). Another ground on which the ‘West’ sets itself against the ‘Orient’ is religion: Christianity is positioned in this polarity to represent the religious model of the civilized world against the religion of the other. It is this binary relationship that creates the split between the two “worlds,” the nature of which is ideological and oriented towards creating an enemy. The cited excerpt depicts Muslims as inherently anti-Semitic, a tenet that purportedly travels through an objective observer to the gullibly thirsty public. The embedded discourse also speaks to the American anxieties about the ‘other,’ its culture, religion, and identity. The adoption of a superposed Christianity-Islam conflict and constructed images of threat and fear sought to appeal to the desires and common sense of the American people.

This pseudo non-fictitious writing aimed at persuading a large segment of the public of the young nation’s need to assert itself and triumph over a ‘barbarous oppressor.’ Utilizing religion as a contributive pillar in the ideological fissure separating the two ‘worlds’ was essential to penetrate the public’s consensual compliance. People yearning for affinities and common grounds with others engaged popular media’s interplay of religion and common sense. Religion was instrumentalized to emphasize the forced disparities between the religion of the ‘West’ and that of the ‘Orient’ as well as the connected values. The ideological process connecting the two religions with arbitrarily selected values of triumph and oppression, linked with America and North Africa respectively, was not unprecedented; it was built upon the existing acrimony among religions to reach the public’s consent about the disparity, enmity, and threat forced between the country of ‘us’ and the amalgam of ‘them’—that is, America versus North African countries seen then as one place.

Foss’s account also constructs the disparities between the two “worlds” via the presentation of the perceived image of women in these worlds. He writes:

They believe the women have no souls, and are only formed for propagation; they are therefore not allowed to enter their mosques, because they esteem them incapable of being received into heaven: Yet the women say their prayers secretly at home. (Foss, 1798, p. 65)

Foss places the women as ‘them’ in the opposite sense of the civilized ‘us’ to delineate the differences between the ‘Orient’ and the ‘west.’ The historically mismatched image of the reduced value of the woman as a means of reproduction and into a demoted subject is articulated within
the Oriental discourse to draw the confines of the ‘Orient’ and construct an uncivilized, inconsiderate ‘other.’

Africa was formerly subdued by the Arabians, under the banner of Mahomet, the name is still applied to a race of dark complexioned, independent Barbarians, who spread the country in devious routs, unite the double profession of a shepherd and a robber. (Foss, 1798, p. 148)

The extract provides a simplistic idea of what a North African inhabitant is and limits their life to either robbing or shepherding, thereby placing them as an ‘other’ that is primitive and immoral. The description matches the West’s oriental view as described by Said (1978); the richness characterizing the American landscape reflects, through different means, the reductive and simplistic world of the North Africans. Whatever associates with ‘them’ is not the United States and whatever associates with the United States is superior to North Africa. Although Africa is the third in point of size among the four continents constituting the globe, in a moral, political, and commercial point of view, it is inferior to all of them. While Europe and America were making rapid progress in civilization and domains of arts and sciences, Africa was seen staggering and retrograding. As part of the whole, North Africa and its inhabitants were depicted as a decayed world built upon the debris of Western civilization (Robbins 1831, as cited in Baepler 2004).

Muslims in American Public space

The arriving captivity accounts were printed in different genres and circulated via various means of entertainment for solely ideological purposes, irrespective of their purported purpose about reporting America’s mission at sea. The making of the ‘other’ and ‘Muslim foe’ and the language of acrimonious resentment for the ‘othered world’ soon appeared to be the ultimate intent behind the media (Null, 2008); they drew sketches of North African Muslims, or as referred to in John Foss’s text, ‘Mahometans.’ These Muslims were depicted in the simplistic image of “barbarians, who wandered in gangs about the country” (Martin, 1815, p.7). Because these icons signified American values of liberation and salvation, they were subliminally viewed in relation to America’s war against a ‘barbarian’ Arab, Muslim and North African nation, who were attributed the reverse values, hence constructed in the public psyche as foes of freedom, peace, and humanity.

The contribution of the narratives was more ideological than journalistic; it sought to underpin the new propaganda via a number of print media, such as the Boston Gazette magazine, which published a series of articles under the title Natural History (Boston Gazette, 1737; Lebow, 2012; Null, 2008). Written literary and mainstream works were also instrumentalized; books, comics, articles like General Description of the Country of Algiers, and other populist forms were immersed in the Orientalist decoy and deployed for public consumption. Whether they were eyewitness accounts or fiction, their exotic depictions of the Arab and Muslim of North Africa was deemed valuable and appealed to the public. The new interest in the stories led to the works being sold in hundreds of thousands—a profitability that blurred the line between reality and fiction (Baepler, 2003). With this mixture of reported stories and hyperboles characterizing the narratives, the works sought to instill the image of a ‘moorish pirate’ in the American psyche and set a context of acceptance and readiness ahead of U.S. warships deploying in North African shores.
The style of writing was reconsidered and tailored based on the new purpose of narratives, which were closer to novel writing than to that of eyewitness accounts via works like *Barbary bride, Angelique in Barbary*, and others (Berman, 2007). It also appealed to a new segment of readership; ordinary public rather than historiographers were targeted, which impacted the dissemination of the discourse on the Muslims and Arabs, particularly in the first half of the 19th century. For an even dissemination in the public, board games for children became popular as they began to feature the exotic images of ‘Barbary pirates’ (Modern Language Association of America, 2000; Arjana, 2015; Fitzpatrick, & Walker, 2016).

The narratives were not presented to the public in bare text but were rather wrapped in entertainment; pictures, cartoons, and caricatures embellished the content and reached their readers and browsers. The visual character of these images led to the efficient circulation of the cartoons in the American public space. It is the ‘motivated’ characteristic of the message, which is not arbitrary, that facilitated recognition and communicated the images easily. Examples of the cartoons were the adventures of Tom Swift and those of cowboy Tom Mix, which were set in a battle against the “barbarian enemy,” irrespective of how historically authentic these battles were (Arjana, 2015). The superposed disparate stories of the Western hero and the ‘Oriental’ ‘villain’ resulted in a temporal and spatial distortion for being non-contemporaneous with each other. While ‘barbarians’ were ridiculed in cartoons and depicted as "[living] upon plunder and rapin," actions of Americans, such as Stephen Decatur, were celebratedly highlighted (Manning & Wyatt, 2010, p. 159).

Reinforcing the dissemination of the borne discourses and ideologies of the narratives further engaged museums and galleries, venues that were instrumentalized to accommodate paintings showcasing glorious and triumphant ‘West’ over ‘Barbary States.’ An oil painting named *An English ship in action with Barbary Corsairs* in 1680 by Willem van de Velde the younger, depicted the confrontation between the two fleets of ships and was named according to the painter’s point of view vis-à-vis the war (Grafton, 2009). Other paintings included works of Dutch Golden Age landscape painter Cornelis Hendriksz Vroom, whose painting—*Spanish Men of War Engaging Barbary Corsairs*—underscored the heroic position of the Westerners over North Africans (Russel, 1983). Other works documenting American paintings referenced the Barbary-depicting works captioned “American frigate *Philadelphia*, which the Barbary pirates had been using to harass American merchant ships” (Babbitt & Schwarz, 2001, p. 8).

The ideology-driven works depicted the imaginary battles between the ‘Westerners’ and the ‘Barbary pirates’ (Gaschke, 2008; Auchterlonie, 2012). The depictions called for popular arts and venues to accommodate the propaganda; Wax museums were instrumentalized to accommodate the American public spectacle. Scenes of the conflict with ‘Barbary corsairs’ were also exhibited in circus performances featuring scenarios of ‘barbarians’ kidnapping captives and Americans ransoming and saving their fellow men (Rowson, Margulis, Poremski & Poremski, 2000; Baepler, 2004; Gilje, 2013). These Barbary scenes were also displayed in other early American arts, such as films, plays, and novels worth no more than 10 dimes (Modern Language Association of America, 2000, p. 220).
The narratives were conducive to the public’s consent of the State’s foreign policies decisions; the circulation of the accounts led to the public’s acceptant state vis-à-vis the aggressive policies in the Mediterranean in the nineteenth century. North Africans’ reactions to Jefferson’s refusal to pay the regular tribute was also countered by contributions from American writers and artists, poets, and novelists, who produced works commemorating the fall of the American frigate Philadelphia. Both literary and populist contributions led the public realizing the need for war against the oppressors (Manning & Wyatt, 2010). The state of alert following the seizure of Philadelphia constituted a prelude to the next wars, in which U.S. military powers would prove capable of fighting away from home, which set an atmosphere of unity against one enemy. Georgians, New Yorkers and others were able to finally form one United States Navy willing to confront the ‘Barbarous oppressor’ (Tucker, 2013).

Conclusion
The arriving images of the exotic, ‘barbarian,’ anti-Christian ‘other’ and the connected discourses constructed during the North Africa activities were not limited to past relations between the two regions of the world; they were conducive to the foundations for today’s lingering, unabated images of the Muslim. The misrepresentations of the Muslims were corroborated via populist genres that carried a new enemy to the public space and into the American psyche. The various appropriations of the narratives into different genres, their consumption, and dissemination demonstrated the American public’s thirst for more details about the new enemy who were the Arabs, Muslims, and exotic ‘moors.’ The narratives also helped justify—and persuade the public about—the State’s foreign policies decisions, which led to the public’s natural consent of unfriendly nineteenth century America.

These images have further formed a layer of the ground for today’s American religious landscape and that of Islamophobia. The narratives were media that constructed the ideological split between in-group ‘Us’ and out-group ‘Them’ through portrayals of Christianity versus Islam; the lawful versus the lawless; freedom versus oppression; nobility versus barbarism; America versus the ‘Barbary Pirates;’ and other dichotomous images that set the context and made it to today’s American understanding of Muslims. This locking of Muslim ‘other’ into this ‘Western’ imagination has given rise to not only perceptions of the Muslim as an aberration in the American public space but also physical reactions and repercussions referred to today under the blanket term Islamophobia.

Endnotes:
1 In semantics, a motivated sign is one whose relationship with what it denotes is non-arbitrary and recognizable for the shared aspects it has with what it denotes. A picture depicting a character similar to the public’s perception of Arabs is a motivated sign of an Arab, unlike a conventional sign representing Islam or Christianity, like those of the a crescent and a cross, respectively.

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