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Redeeming Captivity: The Negative Revolution of Blake's 'Visions of the Daughters of Albion'

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David Blake and Elliott Gruner

Redeeming Captivity: The Negative Revolution of Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

During the Gulf War American and British POWs appeared in the media almost immediately after they were captured. News services broadcast these images across the world, playing and replaying the solemn, distressed faces on television screens. Military, political, and academic commentators interpreted these images for what they revealed about the prisoners' conditions, the war itself and Saddam Hussein. When *Newsweek* magazine put the bruised and swollen face of American pilot Jeffrey Zaun on its February 4, 1991 cover, a picture it had taken from an Iraqi video clip, it unwittingly reminded the world of the complex relations between the media and the conflict, for Zaun's face, blurred in the transfer from television to print, had come to represent a demonized enemy, the consequences of war, and the unblinking eye of the Gulf War media. That Zaun's injuries were largely the result of a violent aircraft ejection, that he had actually beaten his own face before confronting the Iraqi cameras, was hardly consequential to the capacity of his image to arouse indignation and anger. Quite apart from his actual imprisonment, his actual fear and pain, CNN, the BBC, and the AP had turned Zaun's misfortune into a media icon. Perhaps no episode could better demonstrate the continuing import and relevance of the captivity drama.

Academics are accustomed to thinking of the captivity narrative as a genre that flourished in a colonial America where Native American warriors abducted hundreds of Puritan men and women. While most literary criticism has focused on these stories as examples of the genre, our world is filled with captivity narratives like Jeffrey Zaun's. From movies such as *King Rat* and *The Bridge over the River Kwai* to sitcoms such as 'Hogan's Heroes' to the ghostwritten autobiographies of Terry Anderson and Terry Waite, the captivity narrative continually accomplishes its elaborate cultural work through an astonishing range of media and plots.

As evident during the Gulf War, tales of bondage and imprisonment frequently appear in order to justify and legitimize national conflict. The genre has a long and complex history dating at least as far back as the *Iliad*. Perhaps because stories of captivity are frequently told in patriotic settings, scholars have examined the genre mainly for its contributions to national literatures. This perspective has persisted in some of the deeper critical appreciations of the genre that have emerged in recent