Naked and Alone in a Strange New World

Naked and Alone in a Strange New World: Early Modern Captivity and its Mythos

By

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For my parents,

Ben F. and Laverne Allen

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PREFACE

This study originated in a doctoral dissertation that I completed in the Transatlantic History Program at the University of Texas in Arlington (UTA). As a student of the Atlantic world, I became ensnared within the tangle of cultural interactions that commenced immediately following Columbus's initial voyage. During the ensuing years, nearly all Atlantic peoples lost their cultural homogeneity. Most assimilated and/or metamorphosed into a transatlantic society while many more struggled against extinction thanks to disease, warfare, slavery, and most probably, depression. I wanted to better understand this dynamic between Old and New World societies and, in the course of my studies, I came across the captivity narratives. In my assessment, nothing is more exemplary of that process of acculturation.

Although captivity accounts are treasure-troves for cultural studies, few have attempted to mine the texts. Research efforts seemingly mimic the scarcity of the early modern narratives. One wish is that this study may spur interest and spark ideas for innovative methods that may increase the narratives' value to historians. Ultimately, research into these captivities may yield insight to a much larger puzzle. The colonizers also captured considerable numbers of Indians, many of whom were paraded throughout European royal courts as proof of new finds and as sideshow exhibitions. Their story is yet to be told as is the countless tales of borderland and frontier peoples—both Native American and Euro-American—who fell into their opponent's clutches and survived, but failed to record their experiences.

Most colonial peoples produced captivity literature over the course of four centuries and none proved more copious than the New England Puritans. I opted, however, to focus on a small selection of the earliest narratives authored during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and that occurred in the Iberian zones of contact where indigenous cultures remained for a time untainted by the European incursion. Included among the narratives are those of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Hans Stade and Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán. Although each has received some scholarly attention, I wanted to compare and contrast them in hopes of writing a more complete history of the earliest captivity experiences when the New World and its inhabitants was still mostly "new" to the European

explorers. In isolating the textual similarities and differences, I discovered astonishing patterns that prompted some tentative conclusions. Although the authors purportedly offered their readers "true histories" of captivity experiences, the narratives belie complex psycho-social dynamics hidden within contemporary imagery and mythological prose. Because of this literary dimension, I had to reject the narratives as reliable historical records of the actual experiences, but at the same time I recognized their worth as testament to the interactions of divergent cultures, to the individual spiritual journeys and ordeals, and to the psychosomatic manifestations resulting from them. In essence, these narratives offer clues to one aspect of how New World contacts affected individual and societal mentalities as they relate to early modern Christian subjects.

Recent news reminds that this subject of captivity remains timely. Nearly five centuries have elapsed since the debut of these earliest narratives, but captivity persists, replete with similar themes of psychological and physical duress as presented in the historical accounts. In 2008, for example, the Marxist rebel group FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) released two female hostages after a five year ordeal. A few months later Oscar Lizcano, another long-time FARC captive, escaped his jungle prison and returned to freedom. Lizcano and the two women were among the fortunate few to have won freedom; another 45 hostages remained with the rebel captors who hoped that their hostages would help secure political concessions.

While politics seemingly motivated the FARC rebels, captive-taking has been practiced for millennia by various societies and groups for many different reasons, among them the need to procure slave labor, to repopulate a society, for purposes of exchange, and for revenge. The rationale for captive-taking may vary from one group to the next, but captivity chronicles produced over the last five centuries and reports of the more recently rescued FARC captives indicate that the individuals share common reactions to the experience. Psycho-social and physical transformations top the list of thematic threads woven throughout American captivity narratives. Following her release by FARC rebels, Clara Rojas reportedly exclaimed that "we are being reborn" as she reunited with family and friends.[1] Rojas's idea of rebirth is echoed by many captivity chroniclers who relate transformative ordeals that, in the end, produced characters sometimes unrecognizable by their countrymen. Reporters made note of how Lizcano, the other FARC escapee, struggled to speak during an initial interview and they described the former hostage as "long haired, bearded, and gaunt . . . [and] wearing mud-caked trousers." He apologized for his manner of speech by admitting that "if I

am incoherent, it is from being out of the habit of speaking."[2] Similar to this example, eight years of captivity with the Indians left one of the more historically famous New World captives, Cabeza de Vaca, unable to effectively communicate once he reunited with the Spaniards. Furthermore, his misadventure altered his appearance to such degree as to make him indistinguishable from that of the Indians.

The vast majority of captivity literature alludes to heroic journeys like that of Cabeza de Vaca that take the captive on a transformative adventure resulting in either a return to the point of cultural origin or a refusal to return after the captive decides to join the Indian captors and "go native." In many ways, the narratives approximate heroic tales of common in mythology. Throughout this study, the term *hero* is used in its mythic-literary sense to describe the central character of a plot that undergoes a remarkable adventure characterized by a separation from home, an initiation into an exotic world, and a return to, or in some instances a refusal to return, home. Personal enlightenment often results from the cyclical journey. The modern use of the word generally connotes a person of exceptional courage who risks life for the betterment of others. In its medieval context, however, *hero* would have designated someone favored by the gods and who exhibited exceptional, perhaps superhuman strength, endurance, and ability. Because of these attributes, the hero could act as an intermediary between mortals and the deity. Demonstrably, contemporary authors considered the captives as heroic. Various captivity narrators introduced later in this study generally described New World adventurers as "heroicos caballeros" (heroic cavaliers) who accomplished "heroicos hechos" (heroic deeds). Furthermore, when considering the literary style in which the authors opted to relate the captivity experiences, the heroic connotations become even more apparent.

It is perhaps this human drama that renders captivity literature so compelling and timeless. Beyond the voluminous fictional and non-fictional accounts produced over the last five centuries, Hollywood has further exploited the genre that resulted in American film classics as "The Searchers" (1956), "A Man Called Horse" (1970), and more recently "The Missing" (2003). Latin American producers, too, have capitalized upon the narratives and have produced cinematic interpretations as "Cabeza de Vaca" (1991) and "Cautiverio feliz" ("The Happy Captive," 1996). Once considered the purview of literary scholars because of the dramatic and mythological element, historians have increasingly come to recognize that the captivity genre is of considerable importance to cultural studies, and according to one scholar's assessment, "nothing has as much to tell us of the spiritual stakes involved in exploration."[3]

Interpreting this "spiritual" essence of the narratives requires analytical innovation. I have opted, therefore, to employ elements of structuralist and post-structuralist method and theory. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Carl Jung, two twentieth-century pioneers in anthropology and psychoanalysis, respectively, offered structuralist methodologies for understanding the underlying social patterns through interpretation of the language and mythology it produces. Post-structuralist theory insists, however, that we should not confine culture to a system of symbols and hidden meanings, but rather culture should be understood as a "sphere of practical activity shot through by willful action, power relations, struggle, contradiction and change."[4] Undeniably, the language of each narrative often masks the terrible reality that each captive confronted in his daily life-and-death struggles. Survival required, along with a degree of luck, ingenuity and constant negotiation with self and captor. This is the real history that I want to reveal from beneath the shroud of symbolic prose. It was, after all, contemporary language and metaphor tapped by the captivity authors that gave meaning and significance to their ordeals for themselves and their audience. The task is to translate this dynamic from the two dimensional "unreal" text into a multi-dimensional context.

For the historian, textual analysis is wrought with difficulties. Traditionally, historians sift records for facts, data, and corroborating evidence that may be useful in rendering an objective explanation for some human occurrence. Following the example of the *Annales* school of historical method, however, I move beyond the comfort zone of the traditionalists and instead embark upon a *histoire des mentalités* (history of mentalities).[5] The captivity narratives that I have opted to study provide more clues into the authors' psycho-social climate and zeitgeist than they do to factual events and circumstances surrounding the experience. Post-structuralists rightly argue however that interpretation of texts can never occur in a vacuum. The student must engage the subject by looking through his or her unique cultural and historical prism. By using structuralist method to attempt a contextual interpretation, I am only approximating the meaning that early modern captivity narratives conveyed to contemporary readers. Arguably, though, history has no meaning unless it is interpreted using modern language and methods—the mythos of a more scientifically informed generation. Only then do the texts become analytically useful. Perhaps it is appropriate that history (and all other disciplines that engage texts) may never qualify as pure science. Historical analysis requires some license tinged with generational bias in order to give meaning to the subconscious element of human development

that continually resists quantification.[6] The captivity narratives underscore this postulate.

When FARC captive Clara Rojas equated her deliverance from captivity to that of "rebirth" she signified that her experience had deeper meaning beyond the historical event. Her words conveyed an idea of intense physical and mental struggles resulting from a horrendous life-altering ordeal. The same is true of the early modern captivity narrators who attempted to communicate what, to most, was an other-worldly but albeit very real personal journey that caused a reordering of the individual's cultural makeup. When relating this experience, they were restrained by literary and societal conventions of that day. Because their texts are suffused by contemporary mythology, their story offers valuable insight to the cultural mentalities which prove useful to assessing a generation's worldview and how those ideologies altered the course of history. Understanding the endemic societal attitudes of a past generation is critical for progressive development. It remains axiomatic that we cannot adequately assess current affairs without first attempting to contrast them with the historical referents.[7]

In an attempt to better comprehend the meaning of captivity for those who endured it, wrote about it, and read about it, I have spent considerable time pouring through many early modern sources in an effort toward contextualization. I am indebted to many individuals and institutions that have assisted me along the way. Much of the research occurred during graduate studies at UTA and much gratitude is owed to the interlibrary loan staff there who procured a considerable array of obscure sources. I am most appreciative of the efforts and expertise of Nancy Brown-Martinez, the resident expert of the Center for Southwestern Research at the University of New Mexico, who went beyond the call of duty in helping to locate minutiae. Only a short time ago, a project of this nature would have required massive amounts of travel, time, and finances to visit various libraries and archives around the world. Thanks to the digitation efforts of Project Gutenberg, Spain's Ministerio de Cultura (Ministry of Culture) regarding the Archivos de los Indias (Archive of the Indies) and of Mexico's Archivo General de la Nacíon (General Archives of the Nation of Mexico), once distant repositories are more readily available electronically. Some collections, however, still require the physical presence of the researcher. Much help was offered by the staff and reference librarians who manage several manuscript resources such as the Edward E. Ayer Collection at Chicago's Newberry Library, the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at University of Texas in Austin, and Special Collections at the University of Texas in Arlington.

Many individuals have provided assistance and encouragement, and are thus deserving of recognition. Professors Douglas Richmond, Joyce Goldberg and Steven Reinhardt provided relentless support throughout my doctoral studies. I also wish to thank my departmental friends and colleagues at South Texas College for their help and assistance, and especially professors William Carter and John Tyler. Dr. Carter, a most knowledgeable scholar of the American southwest, graciously offered crucial editorial suggestions and much substantive input. My colleague, Texas historian, and prolific author, Charles M. Robinson III, has provided inspiration through example. Mr. Jim Lipscomb assisted in the creation of maps as did Ms. Erica Villarreal who labored through pages of illegible notes in order to transcribe them to electronic text. Although their assistance proved instrumental in this project, I alone am responsible for whatever faults may exist. Many more close friends and family have also contributed in various ways, but the list would amount to a chapter unto itself. Our thoughts are but a collage of the many souls encountered throughout this brief journey. One most notable is Larry Richardson, Jr., a brotherly friend who now counts among the stars. He will be missed. May those who have shared my trek know that I could not have done this without them and that my heartfelt appreciation and thoughts are forever theirs.

NOTE ON CITATIONS

When quoting Spanish sources, the English translation is provided in the body while the Spanish text will appear in the endnote citation for comparative purposes. Early modern Spanish often lacked uniformity in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Variances occurred from one author to the next, and even within the same manuscript. This resulted from the many dialects unique to specific Iberian provinces during the Middle Ages. In 1492, the Spanish humanist Antonio de Nebrija made the first effort to standardize the language with the introduction of *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (*Grammar of the Castilian Language*), but it was not until 1713 with the creation of the Real Academia Española that Spain brought linguistic and literary conformity by mandating Castilian as the norm. Despite the effort, however, differences persisted between Latin American and Iberian usages. Because most primary source material used for this study originated in the sixteenth century, I have taken literary license to uniformly spell and punctuate Spanish words and proper nouns within the text so as to avoid confusion on the part of the reader. I have, however, attempted to remain faithful to the original spelling, grammar, and style when providing the original Spanish citation. This required that the letter “f” be used in place of the letter “s” to approximate the calligraphic secretary script widely used in early modern Spain and elsewhere.

CHRONOLOGY

Date	Event
c. 1200	"The Poem of the Cid" introduced anonymously and among the first work written in the Spanish language.
c. 1238	First Mercedarian Order established in Aragon for the ransoming of Christian captives from the Muslims; later christened *Ordo Sancte Mariae Mercedis Redemptionis Captivorum*.
c. 1250	Gonzalo de Berceo compiles *Vida de Santo Domingo* about the eleventh-century saint, Dominic of Silos, who gained a mythical reputation for his effort to rescue Christian captives from the Muslims.
1272	Alfonso X's *Grande e general estoria* offers the first Spanish translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which introduces classical mythology to Iberia.
1469	Marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, thus creating the rudiments of the Spanish nation-state.
1478	Catholic monarchs and Pope Sixtus IV institute the Inquisition to root out the false *conversos* and *moriscos*, and to guard against heresy.
1492	Last Moorish stronghold of Granada capitulates, thereby ending the *Reconquista*; Christopher Columbus discovers the New World; Antonio de Nebrija publishes first grammatical text for Castilian Spanish.
1493	First European defections to Indian society by Miguel Díaz and several others who accompanied Columbus on his second voyage.

c. 1508	*Amadís de Gaula* compiled and translated for Spanish readers by Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo.
1509	Diogo Álvares Correia shipwrecked on the coast of Brazil near Bahía and lived among the Tupínambas, who called him “Caramuru.”
1511	Jerónimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero shipwrecked on Yucatán peninsula; taken captive by the Maya.
1514	Mercedarian Order establishes first American mission at Santo Domingo.
1516	Juan de Solis’s expedition to the Rio de la Plata resulting in his death and captivity for several survivors, supposedly including Francisco del Puerto.
1519	Hernán Cortés begins expedition to subjugate Mexico and in the process discovers Jerónimo de Aguilar.
c. 1527	Sebastian Cabot explores the Rio de la Plata and reportedly discovers survivors of Solis’s failed expedition; Cabot’s colonists fell prey to Guarani Indians, among them Lucía Miranda.
1528	Cabeza de Vaca and companions enter unknown parts of North America and suffer captivity; Juan Ortiz is taken captive in Florida while searching for Cabeza de Vaca and the rest of the Pánfilo Narváez expedition.
1536	Cabeza de Vaca and companions reunite with Spanish soldiers in northern Nueva España.
1539	Juan Ortiz discovered and rescued by expedition of Hernán De Soto.
1540	Cabeza de Vaca appointed adelantado of the Rio de la Plata by Carlos V.
1542	Cabeza de Vaca publishes first edition of his *La Relación*.

c. 1550	Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda shipwrecked off Atlantic coast of Florida and taken captive.
1554	Hans Stade captured by the Tupínamba in Brazil.
1557	Hans Stade publishes *The True History of His Captivity* in Hesse.
1560	Cervantes de Salazar publishes *Cronica de la Nueva España*, which contains an account of Jerónimo de Aguilar's captivity.
1566	Diego de Landa publishes *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* that gives further accounts of Aguilar and his companion, Gonzalo Guerrero.
1568	Bernal Díaz del Castillo publishes primary account of Juan Ortiz's rescue in the larger memoir of Hernán De Soto's expedition through Florida titled *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*.
1575	Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda rescued.
1582	John Drake, cousin and fellow adventurer of Francis Drake, held captive for fifteen months by the Charrúa Indians in the region of the Rio de la Plata.
c. 1596	Fray Francisco de Avila taken captive in Florida.
1605	Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca, publishes *La Florida del Inca*, which offers the most popular account of Juan Ortiz's captivity.
1612	Ruy Díaz de Guzman publishes the chronicle *La Argentina* which enshrines the legend of Lucía Miranda.
1629	Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán begins his "happy captivity."

1663	Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán compiles *Cautiverio feliz y razón individual de las guerras dilatades del Reino de Chile*.
1781	José de Santa Rita Durão publishes the epic poem "Caramuru."
1789	Manuel José Lavardín brings the Lucía Miranda to the Argentinean stage in the play "Siripó."
1936	Hugo Wast published his interpretation of the Lucía Miranda legend.
1980	Eugenio Aguirre publishes *Gonzalo Guerrero: Novela histórica*.
1983	Juan José Saér publishes *El entenado*, a conceptualization of Francisco del Puerto's captivity.
1992	Nicolas Echevarría directs "Cabeza de Vaca," a first translation to film.
1995	Carlos Villa Roiz publishes *Gonzalo Guerrero: Memoria olvidada, trauma de México*.
1998	Christián Sánchez translates "Cautiverio Feliz" for film in Chile.

MAPS

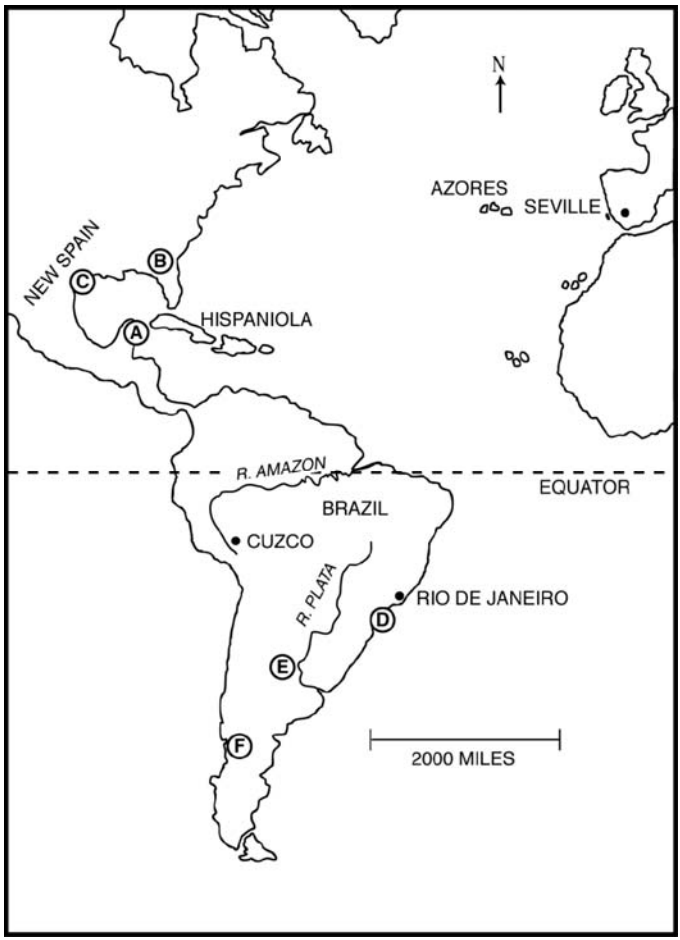

Figure 1. Sites of captivity. A. Jerónimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo Guerrero; B. Juan Ortiz, Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda, and Fray Francisco de Avila; C. Álvar Núñez de Cabeza de Vaca; D. Caramuru and Hans Stade; E. Francisco del Puerto and Lucía Miranda; F. Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán.

Figure 2. The Iberian Peninsula. Depicted are various geographical points of origin of several captives and their chroniclers: Jerónimo de Aguilar (Ecija); Gonzalo Guerrero (Palos); Juan Ortiz (Seville); Cabeza de Vaca (Cadiz); Bernal Díaz del Castillo (Medina del Campo); Gentleman of Elvas (Elvas). A secondary chronicler of the captivity of Juan Ortiz, Garcilaso de la Vega, el Inca, was born in the Peruvian city of Cuzco, which is depicted in Figure 1.

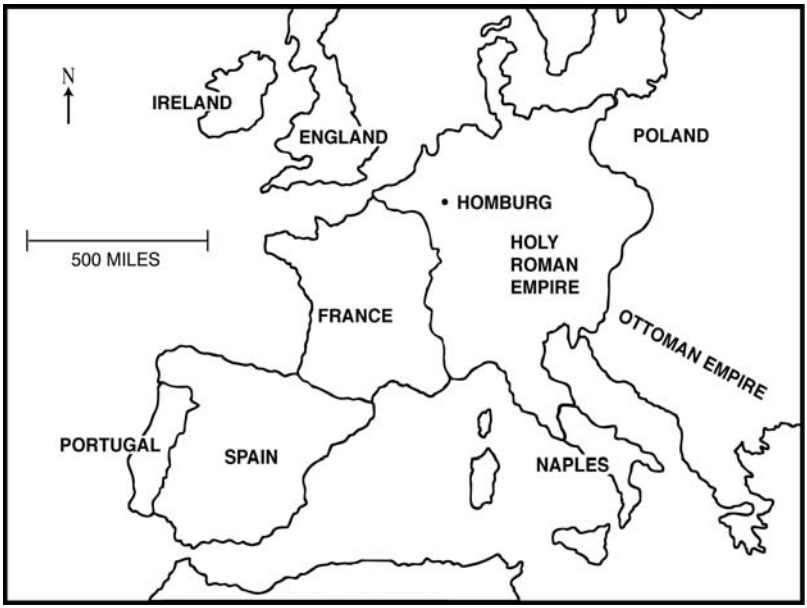

Figure 3. Map of Europe. Hans Stade's home was Homburg (today Bad Homburg, near Frankfurt, Germany). At the time, the Holy Roman Empire and Spain united in a loose confederation under the rule of Carlos V, grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella and who was at once Holy Roman Emperor and the king of Spain from 1516 to 1556.

CHAPTER ONE

CAPTIVITY AND MYTH

In February 1519, Hernán Cortés embarked upon the fateful expedition that resulted in the subjugation of the Aztec empire and the creation of Nueva España (New Spain) in what is now Mexico.[1] During preparations for this venture, Cortés received reports from his advanced scouting party that, surprisingly, some Christians already resided somewhere in the Yucatán peninsula. According to one eyewitness chronicler of the expedition, news of the existence of these Christians weighed heavy on Cortés's mind, so much so that he dispatched a rescue party in hopes of locating the rumored Christians. About one month elapsed before one of these individuals, Jerónimo de Aguilar, finally appeared to relate what was perhaps the first captivity tale to emerge from the Americas.[2] Over the course of a century, several more captivity revelations would follow that offered the Europeans a first glimpse into the strange and often incomprehensible culture of the Native Americans and even more so into the remarkable ordeals of the captives. A small number of these found their way into print and offered contemporaries and posterity first-hand insight to Native American society at the point when it underwent calamitous change in the wake of European colonization.

Aguilar's account, which included that of his shipwrecked companion, Gonzalo Guerrero, was transcribed by various witnesses and included in several sixteenth-century chronicles of Cortés's *entrada* (the Spanish conquest). Eventually, other narratives would follow, including that of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Juan Ortiz, Hans Stade, Hernando d'Escalante Fontaneda, Fray Francisco de Avila and Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán. Three captives authored their own account intended for publication—Cabeza de Vaca, Hans Stade and Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán. Fontaneda and Avila also penned their own narratives but for a more official readership. Collectively, these are referenced in this study as the "first-person narratives." The tales of Aguilar, Guerrero, and Ortiz were incorporated in more general histories authored by contemporary chroniclers of the Spain's American enterprise. For the purpose of simplification, these will be collectively denoted as the

"chronicled narratives." All of the captivities occurred at various sites in the western hemisphere between 1510 and 1630. Although captivity in the Americas persisted long afterwards, these parameters allow focus on a corpus of narratives produced within a definable historical era. The study is also limited to only those documented captivities where cross-cultural interaction occurred. For this reason, omitted are the narratives written by some sixteenth-century European explorers and colonists who, like Robinson Crusoe, became geographical prisoners on isolated, uninhabited islands.[3]

Superficially, these texts offer historical accounts of unprecedented contacts between Old and New World peoples. In most instances the authors touted their chronicles as *historias verdaderas* (true histories). Closer scrutiny, however, prompts skepticism of their accuracy. First, none of the captives admitted to keeping a journal during their long (sometimes many years) ordeals. Second, the first-person authors did not record their experiences until many months, often many years, after the fact yet their recollections appear amazingly precise. Third, when comparing the texts, similar literary patterns emerge, namely in the imitation of the elements found in popular heroic lore and in the allusions of Christian imagery. Fourth, the captivity narratives belie the ultimate meaning of the experiences and instead were incorporated into the larger compendium of imperial literature used to justify colonial prerogatives at the expense of the Indians. For these reasons, the narratives must be rejected as accurate, straight-forward historical sources. They are in fact heroic-style mythologies that reveal less about the actual events and more about the subconscious anxieties affecting the authors and their society, both of which struggled with the American revelations that seemingly contradicted entrenched European beliefs. Furthermore, it may be demonstrated that the narratives served as a rite of passage for the captives as they attempted to rejoin their native societies.[4]

These sixteenth- and seventeenth-century societies existed during transitional epochs in the transatlantic world when revolutions occurred in European religious, political, and philosophical thought. Sometimes violent, sometimes subtle, but always enduring cultural shifts resulted as well when Old and New World societies clashed and intermingled. The captivity narratives that emerged from the Ibero-American contact zones at this time largely reflect the psycho-social unease that accompanied the dynamics. The mid-seventeenth century serves as that arbitrary point when European mythos began its transformation from a more mystically rooted dogma to one that was more empirically based.[5] Old beliefs die hard, however, and the captivity narratives evidence attempts to reconcile reality

with one's societal biases. The Catholic Iberians held fast to their faith and many of the captivity chroniclers showed little reservation in couching the captivity experiences in literary conventions familiar to themselves and their readers. They had to work within the metaphysical framework of the time. The literary devices that they employed mimicked cultural motifs of heroic adventures whose universality stems from what Lévi-Strauss refers to as "unconscious psychic structures."[6]

These captivity narratives should, therefore, be viewed not as reliable historical records, but embraced as cultural artifacts that offer insight to the psycho-social complex of the early modern transatlantic world. The problem, then, is that of historical analysis. If their factuality is suspect, then what usefulness do they provide to modern scholars? Arguably the narratives offer bountiful troves for cultural historians interested in understanding the *mentalités* of the authors and their society in the wake of monumental discoveries that would forever alter the prevailing worldviews. To unlock the deeper meanings, we must deconstruct the texts to elicit historical insights from the literary components. This method offers a potentially valuable heuristic tool that helps us glean historically useful information from those sources suffused with subjective allegory and allusion.[7]

When considered collectively and individually, these early captivity narratives are more *myth* than they are *history* if we apply the more commonly accepted definition of the latter as a factually substantiated human event authenticated by written sources subjected to scholarly scrutiny.[8] The captives of this study are historical personages and they did suffer some form of captivity. This may be affirmed by other contemporary records separate from the narratives. The factual historicity of the narratives ends here, however, since no corroboration exists of what actually occurred during the captivity. Instead, we have only the narrative with its discernible patterns of the hero archetype common to mythology; therefore, the profusion of this archetype and its symbolic imagery invite the question as to why the authors would structure their narratives in this fashion if they hoped to tell the "true history." The answer lies in the literary components and the meanings that contemporaries derived from them. When read through a sixteenth-century prism, the captivity narratives cast rich insight to the ideologies that suffused the early modern transatlantic world.[9]

The language that the narrators, separated by time and space, used to relate diverse captivities communicated a collective unease with the potential meanings of the experiences and, more generally, contact with the New World. Rather than straightforward narratives of events, inferences

to acculturation, rescue, defection, and identity permeate the texts. Given that all of the captivity narratives relied upon distant memories of the experience, subjectivity superseded objectivity. The chroniclers penned the narratives years and sometimes decades after the fact, and no single captive or eyewitness purported to keep a daily journal of events. Consequently, inaccuracies, ulterior motivations, and societal conventions crept into the narratives leading to an imitation of Judeo-Christian and medieval heroic lore. Because the captivity sagas unfolded in pre-literate societies and in geographical regions untouched by Europeans, veracity rested entirely with the captive who returned to relate the tale. Lacking corroboration and documentation, the narratives could more easily evolve into cultural myths that reflected sixteenth-century European and colonial attitudes and concepts regarding the New World.[10]

These attitudes are discernible from the common motifs that emerged from Aguilar's Yucatán captivity tale as related by Cervantes de Salazar. The themes echo through the other narratives although composed at various times by different authors. The similarities in structure and imagery evidence patterns that prompt some tentative postulates. Ideas of acculturation, identity, and assimilation predominate although the narrators never directly confronted the possible meanings. Even more deeply embedded within the language is the prevailing sense of apprehension on the part of those authors who had years to reflect on the experiences before penning the accounts. For this reason, the narratives express a subconscious anxiety produced by the existential quandary of identity and the sense of belonging evoked by the captivities. For instance, when Aguilar finally united with Cortés's army, the soldiers reportedly could not "distinguish [Aguilar] from an Indian."[11] So thorough was his transformation that, as a result of a very long period of captivity, he had even lost much of his ability to speak Spanish. The rescue thus proved seriously problematic for Aguilar and those like him caught up in the larger cultural collisions between very different societies. In the attempt to relate a sui generis life-altering experience, the various authors relied on societal literary conventions accepted as historically sound by contemporary standards. In actuality, however, the texts more accurately reflected the authors' attitudes and worldviews. In essence, the early modern captivity narratives incorporated mythological ritual and imagery that feigned realism while communicating unease brought about by the American encounters.

In many cases the tension proved justifiable given the number of captives who so thoroughly assimilated to Indian society and refused to return to their Christian roots. Defection proved most troubling for