An Unbiased Captive Audience: A Study of the Literary Uses of Captivity Narratives

Lance Lee

When studied properly, history is as close to an accurate documentation of what has happened in the past as possible. However, whenever history is not written about accurately, it is usually done for some sort of personal gain. One seldom-talked-about example of purposely misdirected history can be found in the progression of how Native American captivity narratives were written over time. When these narratives first appeared in the sixteenth century, they were actual accounts of captured people. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, captivity narratives had become popular reading material, so people started fabricating stories to sell for profit or as religious propaganda to spread their way of thinking. What began as examples of the dangers of the New World eventually morphed into an everyday genre for storytelling that people put their own personal moral beliefs into. By creating a timeline that connects these periods using various stories of Native American captives, I will unveil how captivity narratives were slowly altered by greed and religious grandstanding to the point that they lost most of their historical relevancy over time and completely changed the very definition of an American captivity narrative by the twentieth century.

There have been many scholarly reports, essays, and articles that have discussed profiting from the sale of captivity narratives before, but they often focus on debunking the lies and trickery used to create these false narratives. The book *Indian Captive, Indian King: Peter Williamson in America and Britain* by Timothy J. Shannon details numerous reasons why the tall tales of Peter Williamson are falsified and could have never happened. Shannon also designates the second half of their book to all the shady things Peter Williamson did and how he used his narrative to gain

wealth and invest in other ventures.[1] The main point of the book is how Peter Williamson used a tale of being captured by foreign people to make a profit, but it never discusses why. Why would this tactic work in the first place and why would someone produce the idea of doing it? These are the questions I seek to answer in this essay through the timeline I will create.

A close example of what I hope to achieve can be found in *The Indian Captivity Narrative, 1550-1900*. This book discusses captivity narratives in general and the role they play as pieces of popular literature. While this will be a theme that I will touch on throughout the background of my essay, it is the chapter on the narrative of Mary Rowlandson that I truly seek to expand upon. Within that chapter, the author notes how Rowlandson's narrative had propagandist potential that would be used by future writers of regular stories and captivity narratives. My timeline will highlight different examples of propaganda, religious marketing, and event exaggeration throughout multiple captivity narratives; I will go beyond the scope of one time or story and use multiple stories to display the slow decline of historical integrity in captivity narratives as their popularization makes fictitious storytelling more profitable and useful for alternative agendas.

Captive Beginnings

One of the earliest examples of a captivity narrative is the tale of the German explorer Hans Staden when he was captured in Brazil by the local Tuppin Imba people in 1557. Written by Hans Staden himself, this account goes over his capture and subsequent rise to power in the tribe by pretending to be a shaman. The important aspect of this story is the tone with which Hans writes about the Tuppin Imba. He always describes them as savages no matter how much time he spends among them, and there is always a heavy element of fear in the words he uses to describe notable

[1] Timothy J. Shannon, *Indian Captive, Indian King: Peter Williamson in America and Britain* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018.

events. Even as the Native people are giving Hans away so that he can return to the European continent, he is still giving them warnings about how his God was angry with the Tuppin Imba and trying to bribe them with promises of his brother bringing a ship filled with goods if he was treated well. “And I added my own warning, saying that my brother and friends would shortly arrive with a ship full of goods, and if they took care of me I would make them large gifts.”[2] Many of the things that Hans Staden stated about the Tuppin Imba were true at the time and have been backed up by other sources. This narrative is purely a documentary in nature and has no clear motive for any form of fabrication. The level of fear and paranoia exhibited by Staden through his writing feels genuine and not like an act put on for a show. It is this type of honest captivity narrative that begins to be muddled and lost as the various European nations continue conquering the New World.

Captive for Profit

John Smith is well known by many people in the modern era, thanks to the popularity of his captivity narrative, which describes the story of a forbidden love between English settler Smith and Pocahontas of the Pamunkey Indian tribe. His narrative is seen as powerful and quite moving at times, despite being partially a historically false story. There are many theories that attempt to explain the discrepancies and errors within Smith’s account of his time within Virginian Native Americans in the early 1600s. For example, it is quite possible that John Smith was never in any real danger and that the execution he writes about was fake. Some historians have theorized that this was a mock execution that was supposed to initiate John Smith into the tribal kinship system. Through this lens, John Smith's narrative can still be considered historically accurate and would

[2] Hans Staden, *The True History of His Captivity.* Trans. and ed. Malcolm Letts. London: Routledge, 1928, 35.

simply be classified as an account told through misinformation and bias against Native Americans. However, what cannot be justified through any lens or alternate perspective is the position of Pocahontas. In both original published accounts of John Smith's exploits that he created in 1608 and 1612, there is no mention of Pocahontas or the love story they shared. The main explanation for this shocking revelation can be found in a separate captivity narrative about a man named Juan Ortiz.

In the 1520s, Juan Ortiz was a member of a four-man Spanish expedition into Florida in search of riches like those found in Moctezuma and Tenochtitlan. After being captured by Native Americans, he spent ten years among the tribe before being rescued by another Spanish expedition, which he joined as a language interpreter.[3] While the story of Juan Ortiz had several different accounts written about it over the years, the most important one for my purposes was published in 1605 by Inca Garcilaso. Within his interpretation of Ortiz's captivity narrative, Garcilaso writes the Native Americans in a very favorable and more human light than other accounts. Most importantly, in the first part of the narrative there is a recurring event where the wife and daughters of the tribe's chief advocate for Juan Ortiz not to be punished like his companions. They stop Ortiz from being shot and roasted alive, and at one point the eldest daughter sets up an escape route for him so that her father could no longer attempt to kill him. "But the eldest of the daughters... secretly notified Juan Ortiz of her father's determination against him, and that neither she nor her sisters nor her mother would avail or could do anything with the father... 'I will favor and help you so

[3] Garcilaso de la Vega, *La Florida,* Trans. Charmion Shelby, *The DeSoto Chronicles: The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America, 1539- 1543* Ed. Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore. Vol. 2. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1993, 99-118.

that you may escape and reach safety.'"[4] These unique elements specifically tie the captivity narrative of Juan Ortiz to that of John Smith.

It is highly likely that the romantic elements found in Inca Garcilaso's account of the Juan Ortiz captivity narrative were a product of the time. Chivalric romances were a popular trope when he wrote that narrative thanks to the success of stories like Don Quixote. A story where a dashing young man is captured in an unknown land by dangerous people only to be saved by the daughter of the people's leader would certainly catch the interest of readers of the time. Moreover, it also sounds like another famous captivity narrative. As stated, John Smith published two accounts of his travels in 1608 and 1612, and neither of them said anything about Pocahontas. In 1609, an English translation of Garcilaso's story was published in a book called "*Virgina Richly Valued*." A few years later, there was a lot of public intrigue surrounding Pocahontas due to her visit to England with her colonist husband John Rolfe and subsequent death there in 1618. Given these factors, it paints a picture where John Smith was inspired by the romanticized account of Ortiz's captivity narrative to rewrite his own account into one that included a dramatic sacrifice of love to capitalize on the Pocahontas fascination of the late 1610s. This theory is further supported by the fact that the first version of John Smith's story that included Pocahontas was published in 1624, well after the first two accounts he made but still relatively close to her death as well as the interest in it. The story of Pocahontas and John Smith could very well be the first example of someone using the popularity of captivity narratives for their own gain.

Captive of Religion

[4] Garcilaso de la Vega, *La Florida,* 3-5.

The capture of Mary Rowlandson is considered a foundational piece of the captivity narrative genre. Despite first appearing in 1682, after the publication of the aforementioned texts, it is often credited by literary historians as the original captivity narrative and has been the subject of many imitations by later texts. Unfortunately, just like the case of John Smith, Rowlandson's captivity narrative has some mysterious elements within it that may have been influenced by the religious fervor of the era. When the narrative was first published, two versions were made: one was printed in London, and the other was created in the colony of New England in a town that would later become Cambridge, Massachusetts. This distinction is important because New England was controlled by Puritan colonists, and Mary Rowlandson was captured during the middle of King Philip's War 1675-1678, a conflict between the Puritans and the Wampanoag tribe. Thus, the New England version of her story is heavily covered with religious propaganda as the puritans sought to convert the natives who resisted and added fuel to the coming war. The biggest example of a religious hand guiding the New England version of the narrative is the constant quotes from the Bible. Throughout her capture, Rowlandson fully quotes passages from the Bible, citing the book, chapter, and verse number of the passage. This is explained by Rowlandson stating that she has her personal Bible with her, but this does not explain how she finds perfect quotes for the situation that are spread throughout the entire book. There are also hints of two different voices being used within the narrative. When first attacked by the Native Americans, Rowlandson describes the dead bodies of the settlers as "...like a company of sheep torn by wolves." Yet in the very next sentence, she calls the Native Americans "hellhounds" and states that "...the Lord by his almighty power preserved a number of us from death."[5] This quick change between a more average description into a more religious version is also present in multiple points of the narrative. This

[5] Mary White Rowlandson, *The Soveraignty and Goodness of God, Together, With the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative Of The Captivity And Restoration Of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson,* 8.

could again be explained by Rowlandson simply speaking this way as a product of her religious upbringing, but it is more likely that religious terminology has been purposely planted into the narrative to make the Puritan faith more common in literature. Lastly, as the story progresses Rowlandson begins to humanize her captors more as she forms connections and begins to understand them better. This slow buildup of trust that changes the author's perspective over time only makes sense for a story that has a purpose or a lesson to teach. Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative is written like a personal account of an event that has already happened; it does not make sense for her to be writing about an event that she is telling as it is happening and then slowly change how she sees the Native Americans as she writes. There is no outside perspective where Rowlandson states that she saw the Native Americans a certain way at first but then changed her mind later. Immediately after she describes the attack that caused her capture, she writes, "Now away we must go with those barbarous creatures..."[6] However, by the end of the narrative, there is a passage about how she can still remember how nice it was for a Native American she did not know to invite her to their wigwam for pork and ground nuts.[7] This tone is inconsistent for the type of past tense writing that the narrative is trying to emulate. Therefore, it is much more likely that the New England version of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative was not a more religious interpretation of events but rather a reworking of the narrative itself to serve as religious propaganda for the Puritan colonists that read it.

African Captives

As time moves forward, captivity narratives continue becoming more popular, and the tropes of these stories start spreading throughout the mainstream culture of an era. The concept of

[6] Mary White Rowlandson, *The Soveraignty and Goodness of God,* 8.
[7] Mary White Rowlandson, *The Soveraignty and Goodness of God,* 23.

being taken away from one's family and home while being forced to adopt a completely foreign culture has become as well-known as action movies are to modern audiences. This then brings up the topic of the similar yet still unique slavery narratives that had begun being produced in the eighteenth century. A tale of an African slave brought to the American continent is almost identical in nature to a person of any race being captured by Native Americans, and in a few cases, these two genres overlap due to circumstances such as when an African American is captured by Native Americans after being brought to the continent. However, due to the overwhelming popularity of certain narratives such as those of Mary Rowlandson and John Smith, some of these unique combination narratives have been equally as tainted by propaganda or have been altered in some way for the personal gain of a specific group.

For a baseline example of a clean African captivity narrative, I have provided the narrative of Olaudah Equiano which occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. Within this narrative, Equiano dedicates the first chapter to describing the culture of his home region of French Guinea and its people. He describes things such as how his people had few luxuries, lived simple lives, and used the abundance of the land to support their society. The description is incredibly detailed and goes on for some time until Chapter 2, in which Equiano writes about his sudden kidnapping and the emotions that he felt as a slave. "But alas! We were soon deprived of even the small comfort of weeping together. The next day proved a day of greater sorrow than I had yet experienced; for my sister and I were then separated, while we lay clasped in each other's arms."[8] The story is constantly hopping from place to place, yet it still clearly portrays common elements of captivity that have been seen in previous narratives. Olaudah Equiano experiences fear that he may be killed

[8] Olaudah Equiano, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* 1789, Rpt. London: Dawsons, 1969, 13.

by his master much like how Juan Ortiz is constantly threatened with death by the chief of the tribe. Like many of his Anglo-American counterparts, after Equiano learned how to navigate his new world, he enjoyed a relatively high status in society. The most important takeaway of his narrative is that despite the similarities it shares with other examples of captivity, there are no obvious messages or points being made. It is simply a narrative of someone being captured by a foreign group and persevering through adaptation, which still fits the captivity narrative genre without intentionally trying to copy a specific previous example. The narrative is like others in its style but still clearly unique in its content. The same cannot be said for the next captivity narrative that occurred around the same time as Olaudah Equiano's.

The narrative of John Marrant is not technically a captivity narrative, despite its attempts to present it as one and the themes it takes from other actual captivity narratives. John Marrant himself was born a free black man in New York City in 1755 but makes no mention of his racial identity or slavery throughout his narrative. While he does speak about his interactions with Native Americans, at no point is he taken captive by one. Instead, the Native Americans serve as a group of "others" that Marrant can convert to Protestantism through the power of God and his faith.[9] Marrant also uses elements of other captivity narratives that were popular at the time to potentially add more credence to his story. As he notes at one point in the narrative, Marrant avoided execution by the Cherokees by converting his executioner. The very next thing that happens in the story is Marrant forming a relationship with the daughter of the Cherokee king by reading from the Bible, which she finds mystical because "the book would not speak to her."[10] This section is obviously

[9] John Marrant, "A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black. (Now Going to Preach the Gospel in Nova-Scotia). Born in New York, in North-America. Taken Down from His Own Relation, Arranged, Corrected, and Published by the Rev. Mr. Aldridge)" *Unchained Voices: An Anthology of Black Authors of the English-Speaking World of the Eighteenth Century.* Ed. Vincent Carretta. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1996. 110-28.

[10] John Marrant, "A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant," 10.

inspired by John Smith's second version of his captivity narrative in which he was saved from execution by Pocahontas. While it is not a one-to-one recreation of those events, the similarities are there, and the fact that Marrant published his narrative in the late eighteenth century means that there was ample time for the tale of Pocahontas to grow in popularity and become a cornerstone of the captivity narrative genre. This is probably also why John Marrant labeled his story as a captivity narrative, to emulate something that was already well established and would allow his message on the power of God to reach more people.

Captivating Fiction

From the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the idea of being captured by Native Americans is popular in the realm of writing but is quickly becoming less of a daily reality or threat. By the time John Marrant was born, the American colonies were only a few years away from the Revolutionary War in 1775 and gaining their independence as a separate country from Great Britain in 1783. What were once small towns built on land that was brand new, unexplored, and filled with people whose ways were seen as barbaric and mysterious have now become sprawling cities within states. There are trade routes that go through Native American lands and routes that involve trading with Native Americans. Explorers have long since started to create maps to chart the frontiers of the continent, and there were many people who were used as interpreters between the colonists and the many Native American tribes. While there is, of course, more land to explore and more things to discover, a lot of the mystery has started to fade away. Places and peoples have been established and given names. The colonists now have their own lands instead of building on someone else's like when they first arrived in the New World. If someone does get captured by Native Americans, by the time John Marrant publishes his narrative it was entirely possible to bargain or simply communicate with the captors to return whoever they took. Captivity narratives

do still occur during this era, and they usually still touch on similar themes of being thrust into an unknown world, but the idea of being taken captive is becoming more widespread than the actual event, so much so that people like John Marrant create captivity narratives that barely have any standing; their stories are borderline fiction, written with the purpose of making money or spreading a message through popular media.

Native American Captivity Narrative

The final momentous change in the purpose of captivity narratives occurs in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where the words "Native American captivity" meant something quite different from the previous narratives. At this point in time, the United States of America are fully established on the global stage. All the land that was once unexplored has been colonized and built upon by the United States. There is no longer any fear regarding Native Americans, as their ways are understood well enough to make them more like another culture rather than the barbaric monsters they were once seen as. Most importantly, not only are Native Americans now a minority on the continent but the land they own is now significantly less sizeable than that owned by the states. It is now the Natives that are on a "foreign" land, and it is also the Natives who have become subjects of captivity narratives. Native American relocation, the Trail of Tears, and Native American reservations are all terms that have come to be during the 1800s. Because of the events that these terms refer to, Native American captivity narratives began to be about the natives themselves being in captivity instead of the other way around as it used to be. This is where the story of Geronimo the Apache comes into play as an example of this final era of captivity narratives. It is a story of ultimate defiance in the face of a changing world. Native Americans were already being rounded up and placed on reservations by the time Geronimo became an adult, and many of those that escaped were still forced to assimilate into the for their own safety. However, Geronimo

and his people refused to assimilate and, as a result, were threatened when the U.S. became the new owners of the Apache lands. They managed to escape capture by the U.S. Army in 1876 and 1881 but were eventually forced to surrender on September 4, 1886. After capture, they were transported between different forts across the country until ending up at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, where Geronimo remained until dying in 1909.[11] Before his death, he wrote an autobiography that detailed all his escapes and dealings with his captors. The story of Geronimo is that of an underdog fighting to be free despite the overwhelming odds. After the narrative was published, it contributed to the romanticization of underdog stories and the long-held belief of the "vanishing Indian" as all remnants of their people and culture where in one way or another wiped out as the United States grew.

Captive of History

Looking back at all the captivity narratives and the circumstances that surrounded them, their collective history can best be summed up as beginning with fear and apprehension that soon turned to monetary and religious gain through popularity before ending with a reversal of the themes that started them. Hans Staden was one of the first authors of a captivity narrative, and his fear represented how the New World and its people were unknown and that the colonists were always wary. Even when he was set free and there being no more threat, he still refused to let his guard down for a second. As time went on and the Anglo-Americans began to establish themselves, they began to see Native Americans as mysteriously fascinating instead of solely terrifying. In one of the versions of Juan Ortiz's narrative, Native Americans are written more as poorly understood people instead of monsters that could kill at any moment. People back in Europe heard tales of

[11] Geronimo, *Geronimo's Story of His Life 1906,* Ed. S. M. Barrett. Williams- town: Corner House, 1973.

these mysterious Natives and clamored for more information, creating a market for captivity narratives and a way to profit from them. People like John Smith see this market fueled by intrigue and begin altering their own captivity narratives to better capture the popular elements of the time to maximize their own personal gain. By the time of Mary Rowlandson and her captivity, these narratives have become a genre of their own and are catching the attention of powerful institutions like the Protestant Church. Rowlandson's narrative is rewritten to be much more religious in focus so that the messages of God's power and influence can ride the popularity of captivity narratives and reach more people. By the mid-eighteenth century, the genre itself has expanded to include the narratives of African American slaves that offer unique takes on captivity while still touching on common themes of loss and assimilation to a new world. At the same time, however, the captivity narrative genre also starts being diluted even further by people like John Marrant—who created a story that does not actually fit the definition of captivity narratives. Such writers sought notoriety using pre-established works and were published in an era when actual captivities were becoming less common. Finally, captivity narratives reach the conclusion of all these threads of change and growth. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, after the North American continent has been colonized and conquered by the Anglo-Americans, captivity narratives in a way go back to their roots and are about Native Americans being captured by U.S. citizens. The roles have been reversed, yet the idea remains popular in mainstream culture. Where there was once fear of unknown people, there is now bravery in the face of a known enemy. Instead of Europeans being captured and forced to assimilate into a new society to survive, Native Americans must assimilate into a culture they have known for a while to avoid capture. Geronimo and his group may have been captured inside a fort, but many other Native Americans were equally as trapped by a society that overtook what was once their homelands.

In the end, there was no big secret to why captivity narratives became more about messages and popularity than actual experiences. A market for these stories was established early on, and people simply took advantage of the new genre that would sell well at the time. Even as the captors changed faces, there was still a market for the stories of the captured, just for a different reason. The fact of the matter is that people care more about a good story and themes they can relate to than actual history. If themes and history happen to coincide with each other, then that is just a happy bonus for the general audience.