



SEDERI Yearbook

ISSN: 1135-7789

sederiyarbook@yahoo.es

Spanish and Portuguese Society for English

Renaissance Studies

España

Gómez Galisteo, Ma del Carmen  
Representing native American women in early colonial American writings: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de  
Vaca, Juan Ortiz and John Smith  
SEDERI Yearbook, núm. 19, 2009, pp. 23-43  
Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies  
Valladolid, España

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=333527606002>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

## Representing native American women in early colonial American writings: Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Juan Ortiz and John Smith

M<sup>a</sup> del Carmen Gómez Galisteo  
*University of Alcalá de Henares*

### ABSTRACT

Most observers of Native Americans during the contact period between Europe and the Americas represented Native American women as monstrous beings posing potential threats to the Europeans' physical integrity. However, the most well known portrait of Native American women is John Smith's description of Pocahontas, the Native American princess who, the legend goes, saved Smith from being executed. Transformed into a children's tale, further popularized by the Disney movie, as well as being the object of innumerable historical studies questioning or asserting the veracity of Smith's claims, the fact remains that the Smith-Pocahontas story is at the very core of North American culture. Nevertheless, far from being original, John Smith's story had a precedent in the story of Spaniard Juan Ortiz, a member of the ill-fated Narváez expedition to Florida in 1527. Ortiz, who got lost in America and spent the rest of his life there, was also rescued by a Native American princess from being sacrificed in the course of a Native American ritual, as recounted by the Gentleman of Elvas, member of the Hernando de Soto expedition. Yet another vision of Native American women is that offered by Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, another participant of the Narváez expedition who, during almost a decade in the Americas fulfilled a number of roles among the Native Americans, including some that were regarded as female roles. These female roles provided him with an opportunity to avert captivity as well as a better understanding of gender roles within Native American civilization. This essay explores the description of Native American women posed by John Smith, Juan Ortiz and Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca so as to illustrate different images of Native American women during the early contact period as conveyed by these works.

KEYWORDS: Native American women, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, *Naufragios*, Juan Ortiz, Captain John Smith, Pocahontas.

The discovery of America, from the European point of view, was a shock. The New World brought along a number of drastic changes in economy, thought, philosophy, geography, cartography and even history, shaking men's trust in biblical authority as well as in classical writers, who had ignored the existence of this new continent (Cevallos-Candau 1994: 1; Boorstin 1983: 256). America was not discovered just from a physical point of view but also mentally (Zerubavel 1992: 35), the phrase "unknown to the classics" becoming a recurrent one to describe the new lands that were being discovered.<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons why the "discovery" was so shocking was because the New World was inhabited by the "Indians," as they were called following Columbus's misidentification of America as the Indies. Europeans wondered if Native Americans were human and theologians and lay people alike engaged in this debate,<sup>2</sup> all the more heated because prior to 1492 the Europeans had had not even the slightest notion that there might be other people living across the Atlantic.<sup>3</sup> Many thought Native Americans could not possibly be human, for, if they were, their ignorance of Catholicism would go against the biblical assertion that the gospel had been spread to all living beings (Lovejoy 1994: 604-605). The sudden appearance of this New World "might therefore be deemed at the very least an act of outrageous hubris, if not of downright blasphemy" (Sell 2002: 41). From the beginning of the discovery process, "difference and alterity constituted strategies of exploitation, exclusion and representation" (Zavala 1989: 329). In the words of Pastor,

---

<sup>1</sup> "Had I Ptolemy, Strabo, Pliny or Solinus here [...] I would put them to shame and confusion," wrote Spanish conquistador in Chile Barros in 1531 (quoted in Scammell 1969: 393).

<sup>2</sup> In Spain, Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé Las Casas got involved in a bitter debate over the Native Americans' having a soul or not that culminated in the Junta de Valladolid, a several-month talks in 1550 among various theologians.

<sup>3</sup> Europeans had had some vague notion about the existence of Africa, India or China before they were thoroughly explored and reports written about these places, but America had been prior to 1492 absolutely ignored (Todorov 1989: 14).

a process of conquest is, inevitably, a process of destruction; that the chronicle of discovery had gradually turned into a chronicle of disillusionment, alienation and loss; that colonizing and enslaving a people really implies the loss of any possibility to understand the identity of the colonized and simultaneously, the loss of ones [sic] own in the irreducible challenge of the Other; that reducing the world to ones [sic] needs and dreams destroys any possibility of truly discovering new worlds. (1989: 153)

From a materialistic perspective, regarding Native Americans as beasts and brutes involved profitable financial prospects, for that allowed for their enslavement and subsequent exploitation by means of the “encomienda” system or similar ways of bondage.<sup>4</sup>

Colonial texts illustrate the encounter of Europeans with Native Americans –how one discovers, faces and negotiates the Other, who arouses attraction at the same time as rejection (Kristeva 1991: 116). Fascinated by the New World, early European observers devoted much of their accounts to the description of the Native Americans. These texts are permeated by the notions of mimesis and alterity, sameness and difference, the I (or we) versus the Other(s) (Wade 1999: 332). Very early in narratives describing European-Native contact, be them discovery, exploration or colonization accounts, the Native Americans came to represent the ubiquitous Other against whom Europeans described and defined themselves. The concept of national identity was a most pressing concern in the early modern period, “since it was then that various different notions directly connected with the formation of identity firstly appeared in a recognizable form: Europe (as a community of colour) and its others, whiteness and blackness (or ‘whites’ and ‘non-whites’), purity of blood and lineage, social belonging, gender adscription or the anxiety of origins” (López-Pelaéz Casellas and López-Pelaéz Casellas 2006: 9-10).

In shaping their own identity versus Native Americans, Europeans always defined themselves as superior, for “such a negative reference group was used to define White identity or to

---

<sup>4</sup> The “encomienda” was the assignment to a conquistador of a lot of Native Americans along with an extension of land. He was to benefit from the Native Americans’ labor and, in exchange, had to provide them with housing, education and Christian instruction. Though legally the Native Americans were not slaves, abuses became a common feature.

prove White superiority over the worst fears of their own depravity" (Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 1993: 63-64). Beginning with Columbus, the difference of the Other is immediately considered inferior to Europeans (Todorov 1989: 50). Consequently, discovery and conquest greatly contributed to "the constitution of the modern ego, not only as a subjectivity, but as subjectivity that takes itself to be the center or end of history" (Dussel quoted in White 2003: 489).

It was a popular convention to present America as a female in many an early modern account.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Sir Walter Raleigh wrote in *The Discoverie of Guiana* that "Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought" (1998 [1910]).<sup>6</sup> Raleigh continued with this trend of identifying America with the female in his naming Virginia so after Queen Elizabeth. For others, America was not a maiden, though, but rather a prostitute offering Europeans her services. Keymis, a member of Raleigh's expedition to Guiana, perceived America as such –"whole syeres of fruitfull rich groundes lying now waste for want of people, doe prostitute themselues vnto us, like a faire and beautifull woman in the pride and flower of desired yeares" (quoted in Fuller 1991: 63). One way or another, be America a maiden about to be (willingly or by the use of force) deflowered, the representation of America as a woman fulfilled an important aspect of imperial discourse:

the erotics of imperial conquest were also an erotics of engulfment. At one level, the representation of the land as female is a traumatic trope, occurring almost invariably, I suggest, in the aftermath of male boundary confusion, but as a historical, not archetypal, strategy of containment. As the visible trace of paranoia, feminizing the land is a compensatory gesture, disavowing male loss of boundary by reinscribing a ritual excess

---

<sup>5</sup> For Montrose, English representations of America as a maiden are closely related to the circumstance that by then England was ruled by Elizabeth I, a monarch and a woman (1991: 3). Similarly, Castile was being ruled by a female monarch; analyzing Columbus' writings, Gerbi brings attention to "los límites expresivos que le imponía la majestad femenil de la soberana a quien se dirigía (y que, según ciertos estudiosos, le dictaron las idealizaciones de las costumbres sexuales de los indígenas, y la insistencia en su capacidad de ser convertidos al cristianismo" (1978: 27).

<sup>6</sup> Fuller connects Guiana's maidenhead to Raleigh's temporary expulsion from court for having married one of Elizabeth's ladies in waiting (1991: 57-59).

of boundary, accompanied, all too often, by an excess of military violence.<sup>7</sup> (McClintock 1995: 24)

The inferiority of the Native Americans rested on the negative representation of them in colonial texts (Zavala 1989: 325), picturing them more often than not as deceitful, cannibal savages (Montrose 1991: 5). An especially productive way of marking the Other's difference was the description of Native American women whose aspect was monstrous or whose sexual behavior was non-normative (Trexler 1995: 2). Moreover, "through the rubric of monstrously 'raced' Amerindian and African women, Europeans found a means to articulate shifting perceptions of themselves as religiously, culturally, and phenotypically superior to those black or brown persons they sought to define" (Morgan 1997: 168). Because there were no women travelers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hadfield 2001: 2), Native American women were marked as the Other in two aspects –for being non-European and for being females. The close interrelationship between sexuality (or sex) and alterity dates back to the first reported Others –the Danaides, Egypt natives who arrived in Argos, as re-told by Aeschylus (Kristeva 1991: 54). The Danaides' otherness is double-fold –in their coming from abroad and in their rejection of marriage (Kristeva 1991: 56); with this, they challenge society at several levels –physical origin and social conventions. Native American women, being native and non-male, were doubly marked as the Other. Portrayed as monstrous beings, Native American women came to represent "the epitome of sexual aberration and excess. Folklore saw them, even more than the men, as given to a lascivious venery so promiscuous as to border on the bestial" (McClintock 1995: 22).

Native American women figured prominently in the first instances of contact between Native American groups and the Europeans (Kidwell 1994: 149). Since Europeans filtered their perceptions of Native American gender and sexual mores through

---

<sup>7</sup> So pervasive has been this identification of America with the female that in American literature "landscape is deeply imbued with female qualities. [...] It has the attributes simultaneously of a virginal bride and a non-threatening mother; its female qualities are articulated with respect to a male angle of vision; what can nature do for me, asks the hero, what can it give me? Of course, nature has been feminine and maternal from time immemorial. [...] The fantasies are infantile, concerned with power, mastery and total gratification: the all-nurturing mother, the all-passive bride" (Baym 1981: 135-136).

their own values (Montrose 1991: 2; Kidwell 1994: 150), Europeans' prejudices inevitably colored their perceptions of Native American society as well as reducing their scope to male tasks such as war, politics, or religion, on which women did not play any significant role (Rountree 1998: 2). Thus, Europeans usually remarked on women's subordinate role to their husbands and their industriousness when compared to Native American men's laziness (Bragdon 1996: 578; Lurie 1959: 57), what John Smith called the "duty of their women, exercise for their men" (Smith 1631).<sup>8</sup> Instead of being reduced to secondary or anecdotal roles, Native American women fulfill a leading role in three fundamental accounts of the early contact period of American history: the account of the 1527 Pánfilo de Narváez expedition by Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, the report of the 1539 Hernando de Soto expedition by the Hidalgo de Elvas and Captain John Smith's writings about the 1607 foundation of the English settlement of Jamestown in Virginia.

In 1527 Pánfilo de Narvaéz was appointed *Adelantado* (governor) of Florida with the assignment to conquer and populate the area. The expedition sailed from Sanlúcar de Barrameda in June 1527 and arrived in Florida the following year. A series of misfortunes resulted in the terrestrial expedition getting separated from the ships and ultimately lost; most of the members of the expedition died except for a few who fell captive into the hands of the Native Americans. Out of these, only four would eventually return to Spanish territory after spending almost a decade travelling across the U.S. Southwest. One of these four survivors, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, lived among several Native American groups and fulfilled a number of roles among the Native Americans, including some that were regarded as female tasks and which allowed him to get a better understanding of gender roles within Native American civilization. This constituted a formidable role reversal for "few historical documents depict long-term situations in which the colonizer becomes Other to those he came to colonize" (Wade 1999: 332). Cabeza de Vaca could not fulfill the role of conquistador because of his circumstances (Maura 1996: 55) and instead turned to an ethnographic discourse (Pastor 1989: 136).

---

<sup>8</sup> Davis also comments on Frenchmen's views on the industriousness of Iroquois women in contrast to men's idleness (1994: 245).

Cabeza de Vaca was first employed by the Native Americans to pick their crops: “among many other afflictions, in order to eat I had to pull the roots from the ground under the water among the canes where they grew. My fingers were so worn by this that a light brush with a piece of straw would cause them to bleed” (Cabeza de Vaca 1993: 64). This was a female task, as he himself acknowledged in his *Account*, the testimony of his experiences, written after his return to Spain:

among these people men carry no loads, nor anything heavy. This is done by women and old people, who are the people they least esteem. [...] The women are worked very hard with many tasks, and out of the twenty-four hours in a day, they rest only six. They spend the rest of the night stoking their ovens to dry those roots that they eat. At dawn they begin to dig and carry firewood and water to their dwellings and to take care of other important needs. (Cabeza de Vaca 1993: 71)

Followingly, Cabeza de Vaca became a trader; despite the fact that being a trader was a female activity for the Native American societies Cabeza de Vaca lived among (Wade 1999: 333), he was most willing to perform this task –“I liked this trade, because it gave me the freedom to go wherever I wanted. I was obligated to nothing and was not a slave” (Cabeza de Vaca 1993: 65). As Wade (1999: 333) states, “his gender is irrelevant to the performance of these roles. He is same with women because he is not a warrior and he performs women’s work. Also like women, he enjoys safe conduct and can cross ethnic boundaries.”<sup>9</sup> Even though he becomes a trader and a go-between among different Native American groups, he still remains a European at heart and offers a European explanation for his being comfortable with this role (Todorov 1989: 209).

Cabeza de Vaca escapes the usual fate of European men captured by the Native Americans (death) and, instead, like captive women and children (who were usually spared) must engage himself “in a deeply ambivalent dialectic between exploitation and negotiation” (Brooks 1996: 299). European captives to the Native Americans managed to find a space for themselves within Native

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Gómez Galisteo (forthcoming in 2009). Both outsiders and berdaches were banned from active participation in warfare but, nevertheless, they could perform roles such as nursing the wounded, helping with the logistics... (Adorno 1991: 170; Fulton and Anderson 1992: 606; Callender and Kochems 1983: 449).



American society and so provide themselves with security and comfort (Brooks 1996: 301), and this is what Cabeza de Vaca does as a trader. Cabeza de Vaca benefitted from the fact that gender for a number of Native American groups of present-day United States was not a fixed category (as sex was), but, rather, a social category (Bragdon 1996). This consideration of gender as a convention, a cultural construction, allowed for people of one sex being able to perform tasks considered belonging to the other gender; in turn, their gender was determined not on accounts of their biological sex but according to their social gender (Wade 1999; Trexler 1995; Blackwood 1984: 41). This flexibility in terms of gender roles allowed Cabeza de Vaca to successfully fulfill female roles and improve his situation.

During his time in the Americas, Cabeza de Vaca realized that there existed what he termed “womanish men”: “I saw one wicked thing, and that was a man married to another man. There are womanish, impotent men who cover their bodies like women and do women’s tasks. They shoot bows and carry heavy loads. Among these people we saw many of these womanish men, who are more robust and taller than other men and who carry heavy load” (Cabeza de Vaca 1993: 90). The berdaches exemplify the flexibility of gender in Native American society: men who dressed, behaved, spoke, and worked as women –including performing passive sexual roles to other men (Trexler 1995: 65; Callender and Kochems 1983: 443).<sup>10</sup> The Spanish term *berdache* came via the Arabic *bardag* or the Persian *bardaj*, meaning a boy captive who was used sexually (Fulton and Anderson 1992: 603; Blackwood 1984: 27). The semantics of the term led Europeans to identify homosexuality with berdaches although this was not exactly true, for although berdaches engaged in homosexual relationships in a passive role, “North American homosexuality transcended berdaches; though they were its most visible and –except for their spouses– its most consistent participants, their orientations could be bisexual or heterosexual” (Callender and Kochems 1983: 444). Also, the berdaches’ husbands were not other berdaches, but men who were regarded by their communities as heterosexual and who could have female wives (Callender and Kochems 1983: 449). The term preferred by Native

---

<sup>10</sup> Female gender crossing was also possible among some Native American groups (Blackwood 1984: 28).

Americans to refer to berdaches indicate their dual nature – “halfman-halfwoman, man-woman, would-bewoman” (Callender and Kochems 1983: 443).

Apart from fulfilling female roles and activities, the berdaches performed a number of activities that were neither male nor female, but were reserved exclusively to them on account of their special status (Callender and Kochems 1983: 448) such as participating in rituals or being go-betweens (Fulton and Anderson 1992: 606). Cabeza de Vaca not only was a go-between among the Native Americans in his condition as trader (Wade 1999) but he also became a healer. Cabeza de Vaca explains that they were forced by the Native Americans to perform healings lest they would starve (Cabeza de Vaca 1993). Thus, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions adopted a new role that would give them a better status within Native American society, demanding payment in return for their services. Cabeza de Vaca learned to negotiate with the fear he and his companions aroused in the Native Americans – “Cabeza de Vaca and his party had not only survived hardship; they had survived their own fears and learned to manipulate of others” (Adorno 1991: 188).

Different from commonplace descriptions of Native American women as lustful creatures, for Cabeza de Vaca Native American women are not sexual beings, or, at least, they are not for him and his companions. In his account, Cabeza de Vaca does not include any sort of sexual remarks at all and he does not portray Native American women as lecherous but, on the contrary, as modest: “the women cover their private parts with grass and straw” (Cabeza de Vaca 1993: 105). For Cabeza de Vaca, Native American women are mothers rather than women, even mentioning pregnancy and nursing: “from the Isle of Misfortune to this land, all the Indians we encountered have the custom of not sleeping with their wives from the time they first notice they are pregnant until the child is two-years old. The children nurse at the breast until they are twelve years old, when they can look for food for themselves” (Cabeza de Vaca 1993: 85).

Cabeza de Vaca and the three other members of the expedition, Andrés Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo and the Moorish black slave Estebanico, were eventually found by Spanish troops led by captain Diego de Alcaraz and returned to New Spain. Cabeza de Vaca

became the most well-known member of the expedition by far due to the publication of the account of his experiences, *Naufragios* (Zamora, 1542; Valladolid, 1555), usually known in English as *The Account*. Back in Spain, Cabeza de Vaca returned and petitioned to be sent back to Florida as *Adelantado* of a new expedition to the area but the post went to Hernando de Soto instead. It was in the course of the expedition when De Soto found another missing member of the Narvaéz expedition, Juan Ortiz, in 1539.

Maybe because he never returned to Spain, Juan Ortiz is left out from the vast majority of accounts describing the Narvaéz expedition.<sup>11</sup> After searching in vain for the lost terrestrial expedition (of which Cabeza de Vaca was a member) for a year, the ships returned to Cuba, where Narvaéz's widow ordered them back to Florida in search for the missing expedition members. In present-day Charlotte Harbor, Florida, they saw a note on a stick. A boat with several men was sent to retrieve the note, believing it to have been left by the members of the terrestrial party. One of these men who disembarked was Ortiz, eighteen years old at the time. The note was part of an elaborate plan on the part of the Timicuan Native Americans of the Uzica village, a Calusa tribe, to mislead and lure the Spaniards (Elvas 1922).

The Uzica were no strangers to the participants of the Narvaéz expedition –after landing on Good Friday, April 15, 1528, in present-day Tampa Bay, Narvaéz decided to know where the natives had obtained the gold he saw in some of their adornments. In retaliation for the natives' refusal to tell him, Narvaéz ordered that the nose of their leader, Chief Hirrihugua, be cut off and had the Spaniards' dogs devour the chief's mother. When Ortiz and his companions fell into the trap and were captured by the Uzica, the Chief had three of them shot with arrows immediately after landing to make them pay for their previous misdeeds. Wrongly believing that Ortiz was

---

<sup>11</sup> Cabeza de Vaca himself fails to mention Juan Ortiz's disappearance, though he included a chapter (the thirty-eighth) on what happened to the people in the ships after the disappearance of the terrestrial expedition. A possible reason why Cabeza de Vaca did not include Juan Ortiz in his account was that, even if he learned about his story, in Cabeza de Vaca's eyes, Ortiz would have surely lost all legitimacy. Those who committed "acts of cultural betrayal," "ceased to have legitimacy in the Spanish Imperial context" (Sánchez 1992: 266). In contrast, Cabeza de Vaca repeatedly asserted that he always remained a Christian and never totally assimilated into Native American culture.

Narváez's son, Hirrihugua spared him for a special death known as "barbacoa," consisting of placing the captive over an open fire to be roasted alive:

by command of Ucita, Juan Ortiz was bound hand and foot to four stakes, and laid upon scaffolding, beneath which a fire was kindled, that he might be burned; but a daughter of the Chief entreated that he might be spared. Though one Christian, she said, might do no good, certainly he could do no harm, and it would be an honour to have one for a captive; to which the father acceded, directing the injuries to be healed. When Ortiz got well, he was put to watching a temple, that the wolves, in the night-time, might not carry off the dead there, which charge he took in hand, having commended himself to God. (Elvas 1922)

When Hirrihugua once more decided to sacrifice Ortiz, Uleleh, the chief's daughter, arranged it for Ortiz to move to a neighboring village ruled by Chief Mocoço, where Ortiz would spend the next nine years of his life. When he was found by the Spaniards, Ortiz looked like a Native American, painted and tattooed, and was no longer able to speak proper Spanish. He joined the De Soto expedition as an interpreter but he died in the course of this expedition and thus never returned to Spain (Elvas 1922).

Captain John Smith felt the thirst for adventures at a very early age and, at sixteen, after his father's death, he left his native village, Willoughby, in Lincolnshire, to become a mercenary soldier in several European campaigns. He soon distinguished himself for his bravery, which earned him the title of captain. Back in England, in 1606 he joined the Virginia Company of London, created to colonize the area and embarked in the 1607 expedition that would found the colony of Jamestown. Like Ortiz and Cabeza de Vaca, Smith soon became prisoner to the local natives. His testimony about his captivity at the hands of the Powhatans, though, differed in subsequent retellings as time went by. In his first book dealing with his experiences in Virginia, *True Relation*, published in 1608, Smith did not allude to any rescue and, instead, stressed Chief Powhatan's kindness and how he was returned safely and promptly to Jamestown:

the next night I lodged at a hunting town of Powhatams, and the next day arrived at Waranacomoco upon the river of Pamauncke, where the great king is resident. [...] Hee kindly welcomed me with such good wordes, and great Platters of sundrie Victuals,

assuring mee his friendship, and my libertie within foure days. Hee much delighted in Opechan Comoughs relation of what I had described to him, and oft examined me upon the same. Hee asked me the cause of our coming. [...] He desired mee to forsake Paspahegh, and to live with him upon his River, a Countrie called Capa Howasicke. Hee promised to give me Corne, Venison, or what I wanted to feede us: Hatchets and Copper wee should make him, and none should disturbe us. This request I promised to performe: and thus, having with all the kindnes hee could devise, sought to content me, hee sent me home, with 4 men: one that usually carried my Gowne and Knapsacke after me, two other loaded with bread, and one to accompanie me. (Smith 2003 [1608])

Accidentally wounded in 1609, Smith returned to England to receive medical treatment. In the meantime, the most famous account of the De Soto expedition, the narrative of an anonymous Portuguese gentleman from Elvas, first published in Evora, Portugal, in 1557,<sup>12</sup> had been published in English for the first time in 1609, under the title *Virginia richly valued by the Description of the Mainland of Florida* and edited by Richard Hakluyt.<sup>13</sup> Chances are that Smith read about Ortiz's experience for books recounting it were widely available in London at the time (Coker quoted in Kaczor 1995).

In 1616, when Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan, now married to an Englishman, John Rolfe, and named Rebecca, was preparing her arrival in England, John Smith wrote a letter to Queen Anne, in which he spoke of Pocahontas in most praising terms and asked the Queen to make sure that this Native American princess receive the treatment she deserved –that is, as a royal.<sup>14</sup> Smith credited the survival of Jamestown to Pocahontas: “she next under God, was still the instrument to preserve this colony from death,

---

<sup>12</sup> There are other accounts of the De Soto expedition. Another participant, Ranjel, told his story to Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, who included it in *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1547). Garcilaso de la Vega el Inca based his account, *Florida del Ynca* (Lisbon, 1605), on a nobleman's oral testimony and the written stories of soldiers Alonzo de Carmona and Juan Coles. Biedma, the expedition's factor, wrote still another account.

<sup>13</sup> It would be reprinted in 1611 as *The worthy and famous Historie of the Travailles, Discovery, and Conquest of Terra Florida*.

<sup>14</sup> For Camboni (2008: 162), this letter is “the ground on which one of the founding myths of white, male America is rooted.”

famine and utter confusion” (Smith 1997 [1616]). In London, Smith met Pocahontas again:

I went to see her: After a modest salutation, without any word, she turned about, obscured her face, as not seeming well contented; and in that humour her husband, with diuers others, we all left her two or three houres, repenting my selfe to haue writ she could speake *English*. But not long after, she began to talke, and remembred mee well what courtesies shee had done: saying, You did promise *Powhatan* what was yours should bee his, and he the like to you; you called him father being in his land a stranger, and by the same reason so must I doe you: which though I would haue excused, I durst not allow of that title, because she was a Kings daughter; with a well set countenance she said, Were you not afraid to come into my fathers Countrie, and caused feare in him and all his people (but mee) and feare you here I should call you father; I will, and you shall call mee childe, and so I will bee for euer and euer your Countryman. They did tell vs alwaies you were dead, and I knew no other till I came to *Plimoth*; you *Powhatan* did command *Vttamatomakkin* to seeke you, and know the truth, because your Countrymen will lie much. (Smith 2006 [1624])

By 1624, when Smith’s *General Historie* came out, Pocahontas had been dead for seven years.<sup>15</sup> With Pocahontas dead and a celebrity, Smith decided to set the record straight about his experiences at Powhatan’s hands, or so he claimed, and there, for the first time, he told about his having been rescued by Pocahontas from being sacrificed in the middle of a Native American ritual.<sup>16</sup> Then, Smith for the first time had his letter to Queen Anne printed, which up to then had remained virtually unknown for everyone except for addressee and addresser. Smith told the story of his captivity and

---

<sup>15</sup> After a season in London in which she was the rage of that season, Pocahontas, her husband and child sailed for Virginia, but Pocahontas died before leaving English waters.

<sup>16</sup> Some modern ethnographers have claimed that rituals similar to that described by Smith or Ortiz are also reported by other observers but that the result was not sacrificial death but rather, a ceremonial, symbolic death by which the prisoner lost his former, European identity and, in turn, became one of them (Kidwell 1994; Puglisi 1991). One of the main critics of Smith’s, ethnologist Helen C. Rountree, author of *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia and Pocahontas’s People*, on the contrary, denies the veracity of Smith’s testimony of the ritual and argues that “no eyewitness writer mentioned adoption customs as such [described by Smith] for the Powhatans” (1994: 236).

release from the Powhatans in the following way in the *General Historie*:

a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before *Powhatan*: then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, *Pocahontas* the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne vpon his to saue him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should liue to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselues.<sup>17</sup> (Smith 2006)

This greatly differed from Smith's own testimony in *True Relation*. The similarities with Ortiz's story are obvious.

Veridical or not, both Smith's story and Elvas' recounting of Ortiz's rescue have their roots in a well-known myth at the time –the story of the Muslim (or Saracen) princess, which became particularly favored in the medieval *chansons de geste*. The exact origin of the story is unclear, though; some theories point to such diverse possibilities as “the classical figure of Medea, a story in Seneca's sixth controversia, tales in the Arabian Nights, an episode in the tenth-century Byzantine epic *Digenes Akrites*, and Orderic Vitalis' account of Bohemond and Melaz” or even that “the story does reflect actual historical events” (Balfour 1995). This story, basically, tells

the tale of an adventurer [...] who becomes the captive of the king of another country and another faith, and is rescued by his beautiful daughter, a princess who then gives up her land and her religion for his, is a story known to the popular literatures of many peoples for many centuries. The theme was so common in the Middle Ages that medieval scholars have a name for it: 'The Enamoured Moslem Princess.' This figure is a woman who characteristically offers herself to a captive Christian knight, the prisoner of her father, rescues him, is converted to Christianity, and goes to his native land –these events usually being followed

---

<sup>17</sup> However, this is not the only passage in Smith's works resembling Ortiz's. Smith had in *True Travals* also reported how, as a captive to the Turks, Princess Tragabigzanda, who fell in love with him, had provided him the means for his escape. Both the Pocahontas and the princess Tragabigzanda episodes can be seen as grounding Smith's claims to the status of gentleman for he resisted the temptation of a love affair with this socially superior woman (Rozwenc 1959: 30).

by combat between his compatriots and hers. (Young 1972: 195-196)

George Percy, another Jamestown colonist, was among the very first to attack Smith's veracity and many other historians would follow his lead questioning Smith's authenticity.<sup>18</sup> Some reasons can be put forward to deny Smith's claim. Apart from the striking resemblance to Ortiz's story, Pocahontas, at the time of her rescue of Smith, was a child, as Smith himself acknowledged: "being but a child of twelve or thirteen years of age" (Smith 1997). Be Pocahontas' story a tale or a true event,<sup>19</sup> as time has gone by, subsequent retellings of the story have transformed it into an American foundational myth, the most important and pervasive myth of the colonial era, along with the Plymouth Rock landing and the celebration of the First Thanksgiving. The Pocahontas story has been used with different goals in mind so as to fit changing political and social situations, though, for this topic has already generated a vast literature, Ann Uhry Abrams' book *Pilgrims and Pocahontas: Rival Myths of American Origins* being one of the most well-known and complete scholarly studies.

For better or worse, Pocahontas has long entered the American popular imagination and folklore, becoming the protagonist of a romance and a children's tale, further popularized by the Disney movie that made the story well-known for people living in countries where it had been unheard of before and for whom the movie version would be factual (Kilpatrick 1995: 36). The movie met the opposition of various Native American voices, especially the Powhatan Nation, who publicly denounced that "it is unfortunate that this sad story, which Euro-Americans should find embarrassing,

---

<sup>18</sup> See Gleach (1996) for a summary of divergent positions about Smith's veracity, especially 22-24. See Young (1972: 182-183) for Smith's literary and historical standing. Henry Adam's 1867 essay "Captain John Smith" in the *North American Review* opened a controversy with regionalist (Southern-Yankee) overtones (Rozwenc 1959: 27). For eyewitnesses' troubles to have their credibility asserted and Smith's attempts to have his own role as historian recognized, see Gurpegui and Gómez Galisteo forthcoming in 2009.

<sup>19</sup> J. A. Leo Lemay's answer to the question *Did Pocahontas Save Captain John Smith?* (1992) met criticism from reviewers, such as Rountree, who finds Lemay's book biased and questioned the credibility of the book (1994: 236). Tilton also found Lemay's answer inconclusive and a starting point for debate rather than a definite answer to the question (1995: 715-716).



Disney makes 'entertainment' and perpetuates a dishonest and self-serving myth at the expense of the Powhatan Nation" (Chief Roy Crazy Horse n.d.).<sup>20</sup> From a more scholarly point of view, the Pocahontas story has become the object of historical studies questioning or asserting the veracity of Smith's claims and even the very existence of Pocahontas. One way or another, the Smith-Pocahontas story is at the very core of American popular culture.

To conclude, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Juan Ortiz and John Smith each offer a different, alternative vision of Native American women. The centrality of women in their respective accounts is significant. Cabeza de Vaca acculturated up to a certain extent into Native American culture by means of performing female roles. Juan Ortiz, in turn, though his deeds are by far much less known than Smith's or his fellow Cabeza de Vaca's, succeeded in totally acculturating to Native American society and spent the rest of his life among them. John Smith was a controversial historian, for his contemporaries and even for some historians nowadays, but he created one of the most popular American myths. In these three accounts we have Native American women as non-sexual objects (Cabeza de Vaca), as saviors (Ortiz) and as protagonists of intercultural "love" stories (Smith), respectively. These three experiences contribute to a better understanding of Native American women. More often than not,

American Indian people often seem to be silent in the history of early America. [...] The voices of Indian women are especially difficult to detect in records written by non-Indian men, who generally did not understand the role of women in Indian societies and usually did not solicit, or did not listen to, women's opinion. (Calloway 1994: v)

Since there are no first-hand Native American women's accounts, their voices are other's renderings, with a more or less visible agenda: "History has stereotyped Indian women as the hot-blooded Indian princess, à la Pocahontas, or the stolid drudge that

---

<sup>20</sup> Native American consultants were hired to keep the movie historically accurate but soon these consultants were silenced (Edgerton and Jackson 1996). Yet, James celebrates this Pocahontas as "the most subversive heroine in the Disney canon, a real-life princess who doesn't waltz off with the prince" (1995). Similarly Marcus comments that she is free from family responsibilities, her father's authority, conventions, sexual constraints and even guilt or regret (1995: 941-942).

[eighteenth-century Episcopalian missionary in Minnesota Joseph] Gilfillan described. Pocahontas and Sacagawea become heroines because their actions ultimately benefited the advancement of American society" (Kidwell 1994: 150). Far from the portrayal of Native American women as princesses or passive beings at the service of the Europeans, Cabeza de Vaca's account presents yet another view of the European-Native American contact in the Americas during the colonial period –that Europeans could become the Other by the adoption of female roles in the Native American gendered labor division. As Cabeza de Vaca's account proves, not only did Europeans represent Native American women in their accounts as they saw fit, sometimes European men were forced to adopt female Native American roles in order to survive. From Native American women being described as the Other by the gaze of European observers, we have the Other being a European man adopting Native American female roles.

## References

- Abrams, Ann Uhry. 1999 *The Pilgrims and Pocahontas: Rival Myths of American Origins*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.
- Adorno, Rolena. 1991 "The Negotiation of Fear in Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*." *Representations* 33: 163-199.
- Balfour, Mark 1995. "Moses and the Princess: Josephus' *Antiquitates Judaicae* and the Chansons de Geste." *Medium Aevum* 64: 1-16.
- Baym, Nina. 1981. "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors." *American Quarterly* 33/2: 123-139.
- Blackwood, Evelyn 1984. "Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females." *Signs* 10/1: 27-42.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. 1983. *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know His World and Himself*. New York: Random House.
- Bragdon, Kathleen 1996. "Gender as a Social Category in Native Southern New England." *Ethnohistory* 43/4: 573-592.
- Brooks, James F. 1996. "'This Evil Extends Especially... To the Feminine Sex': Negotiating Captivity in the New Mexico Borderlands." *Feminist Studies* 22/2: 279-299.
- Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez 1993. *The Account: Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's Relación*. Eds. Martin A. Favata and José B. Fernández. Houston: Arte Público Press.

- Callender, Charles and Lee M. Kochenus 1983. "The North American Berdache." *Current Anthropology* 24/4: 443-470.
- Calloway, Colin G. 1994. *The World Turned Upside Down. Indian Voices from Early America*. Boston, New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press.
- Camboni, Marina 2008. "Two John Smiths and a Tent." *Aspeers: Emerging Voices in American Studies* 1: 161-165.
- Cevallos-Candau, Francisco Javier 1994. "Introduction." Eds. Francisco Javier Cevallos-Candau et. al. *Coded Encounters: Writing, Gender, and Ethnicity in Colonial Latin America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press: 1-11.
- Crazy Horse, Chief Roy N.d. "The Pocahontas Myth."  
<url: <http://www.powhatan.org/pocc.html>>
- Davis, Natalie Zemon 1994. "Iroquois Women, European Women." Eds. Margo Hendrick and Patricia Parker. *Women, 'Race,' and Writing in the Early Modern Period*. London and New York: Routledge: 243-258.
- Derounian-Stodola, Kathryn Zabelle and Arthur James Levernier 1993. *The Indian Captivity Narrative, 1550-1900*. New York: Twayne.
- Edgerton, Gary and Kathy Merlock Jackson 1996. "Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the 'White's Man Indian,' and the Marketing of Dreams." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24/2: 90-98.  
<url: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/printable.aspx?id=1G1:18838472>>
- Fuller, Mary C. 1991. "Raleigh's Fugitive Gold: Reference and Deferral in The Discoverie of Guiana." *Representations* 33: 42-64.
- Fulton, Robert and Steven W. Anderson 1992. "The Amerindian 'Man-Woman': Gender, Liminality, and Cultural Continuity." *Current Anthropology* 33/5: 603-610.
- Gerbi, Antonello 1978. *La naturaleza de las Indias Nuevas de Cristóbal Colón a Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo*. Trans. by Antonio Alatorre. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Gleach, Frederic W. 1996. "Controlled Speculation: Interpreting the Saga of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith." Eds. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert. *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*. Peterborough: Broadview: 21-42.
- Gómez Galisteo, M. Carmen Forthcoming (2009). "Subverting Gender Roles in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century: Cabeza de Vaca, the Conquistador Who Became a Native American Woman." Eds. Fay Yarbrough and Sandra Dale Slater. *Gender and Sexuality in the Native Americas, 1400-1850*.
- Gurpegui, José Antonio and Carmen Gómez Galisteo Forthcoming (2009). "Describing the 'New World': De dicto vs. de re, Historians vs. Eyewitnesses." Eds. Gerald E. Poyo and Tomás Ybarra-Fraustro.

- Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project VII. Houston: Arte Público Press: 3-14.
- Hadfield, Andrew ed. 2001. *Amazons, Savages, and Machiavels. Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550-1630: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hidalgo de Elvas 1922. *True Relation of the Vicissitudes that Attended the Governor Don Hernando De Soto and Some Nobles of Portugal in the Discovery of the Province of Florida Now Just Given By a Fidalgo of Elvas Viewed by the Lord Inquisitor*. Ed. Edward Gaylord Bourne. Trans. by Buckingham Smith. New York: Allerton Book Company. Mirror of a Transcription by Dr. Jon Muller.  
<url: <http://www.floridahistory.com/elvas1.html>>.
- James, Caryn 1995. "Belle and Ariel Never Chose Duty Over Love." *The New York Times*.  
<url:<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE7DB133DF93BA25755CoA963958260>>.
- Kaczor, Bill 1995. "Did Smith Plagiarize Pocahontas Tale?" *New Standard*.  
<url:<http://archive.southcoasttoday.com/daily/07-95/07-11-95/0711APpocahontas.HTML>>.
- Kidwell, Clara Sue 1994. "What Would Pocahontas Think Now?: Women and Cultural Persistence." *Callaloo* 17/1: 149-159.
- Kilpatrick, Jacquelyn 1995. "Disney's 'Politically Correct' Pocahontas." *Cineaste* 21/4.  
<url: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/Pocahontas.html>>.
- Kristeva, Julia 1991 (1988). *Extranjeros para nosotros mismos*. Trans. by Xavier Gispert. Barcelona: Plaza & Janés.
- López-Peláez Casellas, Jesús and Milagros López-Peláez Casellas 2006. "Introduction." *The Grove* 13: 9-18.
- Lovejoy, David S. 1994. "Satanizing the American Indian." *New England Quarterly* 67/4: 603-621.
- Lurie, Nancy Oestreich 1959. "Indian Cultural Adjustment to European Civilization." Ed. James Morton Smith. *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: 33-60.
- Maura, Juan Francisco ed. 1996. *Naufragios*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Marcus, Paul 1995. "Disney's Great Escape." *Psychoanalytic Review* 82/6: 940-943.
- McClintock, Anne 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York, London: Routledge.

- Montrose, Louis 1991. "The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery." *Representations* 33: 1-41.
- Morgan, Jennifer L. 1997. "'Some Could Suckle over Their Shoulder': Male Travelers, Female Bodies, and the Gendering of Racial Ideology, 1500-1770." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54/1: 167-192.
- Pastor, Beatriz 1989. "Silence and Writing: The History of the Conquest." Eds. René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini. *1492/1992: Re/Discovering Colonial Writing*. Minneapolis: The Prisma Institute: 121-163.
- Puglisi, Michael J. 1991. "Capt. John Smith, Pocahontas and a Clash of Cultures: A Case for the Ethnohistorical Perspective." *The History Teacher* 25/1: 97-103.
- Raleigh, Sir Walter. 1998 [1595]. *The Discovery of Guiana. Voyages and Travels: Ancient and Modern, with Introductions, Notes and Illustrations*. New York: P. F. Collier and son, The Harvard classics. *Modern History Sourcebook*. <url:<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1595raleigh-uiana.html>>.
- Rountree, Helen C. 1998. "Powhatan Indian Women: The People Captain John Smith Barely Saw." *Ethnohistory* 45/1: 1-29.
- Lemay, J.A. Leo 1994. Review of *Did Pocahontas Save Captain John Smith* by J. A. Leo Lemay. *The Journal of American History* 81/1: 236-237.
- Rozwenc, Edwin C. 1959. "Captain John Smith's Image of America." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16/1: 27-36.
- Sánchez, Ramón 1992. "The First Captivity Narrative: Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 La Relación." *Proceedings of the II Conference of SEDERI*: 261-275.
- Scammell, G. V. 1969. "The New Worlds and Europe in the Sixteenth century." *The Historical Journal* 12/3: 389-412.
- Sell, Jonathan P. A. 2002. "The Rhetoric of Wonder: the Representation of New Worlds in English Renaissance Travel Literature." Ph.D. dissertation, Universidad de Alcalá.
- Smith, John 1631. *Advertisements For the Unexperienced Planters of New England, or Any Where. OR, The Path-Way to Experience to Erect a Plantation*. London: John Haviland.
- Smith, John 2003 [1608]. "A True Relation of Occurrences and Accidents in Virginia, 1608." Electronic edition by Ralph Bauer. *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith, President of Virginia, and Admiral of New England, 1580-1631, Part I John Smith*. Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910. Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH). <url:[http://www.mith2.umd.edu/eada/html/display.php?docs=smith\\_truerelation.xml&action=show](http://www.mith2.umd.edu/eada/html/display.php?docs=smith_truerelation.xml&action=show)>.

- Smith, John 1997 [1616]. "John Smith's Letter to Queen Anne Regarding Pocahontas." *Mayflower Web Pages*.  
<url: <http://www.members.aol.com/mayflo1620/pocahontas.html>>
- Smith, John 2006 [1624]. *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*. London: I.D. and I.H. for Michael Sparkes.  
<url:<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/smith/smith.html>>.
- Tilton, Robert S. 1995. "Review of Did Pocahontas Save Captain John Smith? by J. A. Leo Lemay." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 52/4: 714-716.
- Todorov, Tzvetan 1989 [1982]. *La conquista de América: el problema del otro*. Trans. by Flora Botton Burlá. México: Siglo XXI.
- Trexler, Richard C. 1995. *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wade, Mariah 1999. "Go-between: The Roles of Native American Women and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in Southern Texas in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century." *The Journal of American Folklore* 112/445: 332-342.
- White, Ed 2003. "Captaine Smith, Colonial Novelist." *American Literature* 75/3: 487-513.
- Young, Philip 1972. "Pocahontas: The Mother of Us All." *Three Bags Full: Essays in American Fiction*. New York: Harcourt Brace: 175-203.
- Zavala, Iris M. 1989. "Representing the Colonial Subject." Eds. René Jara and Nicholas Spadaccini. *1492/1992: Re/Discovering Colonial Writing*. Minneapolis: The Prisma Institute: 323-348.
- Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1992. *Terra Cognita: The Mental Discovery of America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

---

*How to cite this article:*

Gómez Galisteo, M<sup>a</sup> del Carmen. "Representing native American women in early colonial American writings: Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Juan Ortiz and John Smith." *SEDERI* 19 (2009): 23-43.

*Author's contact:* [mcarmengomez@aol.com](mailto:mcarmengomez@aol.com)

*Submission:* 30/09/2008

*Acceptance:* 20/01/2009

Narratives of Colonial Encounter: Cabeza de Vaca & John Smith Introduction to American Literature Professor Iannini Rutgers University September 14, 2011. Subscribe to view the full document. Violence & terror of colonial encounter. 1542. Subscribe to view the full document.Â Argument : 1.We might think of Cabeza de Vaca and John Smith as "pioneers in the science of self creation." 2.Both authors represent the New World as an arena of struggle and conflict in which the natural nobility of the self might emerge and be recognized. Spanish explorer Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca. See more. Pressbooks.Â Mary (White) Rowlandson was a colonial American woman who was captured by Native Americans during King Philip's War and held for 11 weeks before being ransomed. Years after her release, she wrote a book about her experience, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. It went through four printings in a short amount of time and garnered widespread readership, making it in effect the first American "bestseller." See more.Â Transcontinental Route of Cabeza de Vaca and his Companions across South and West Texas and Mexico, as Charted by Alex Krieger. See more. During its early history, America was a series of British colonies on the eastern coast of the present-day United States.Â Some of the American literature were pamphlets and writings extolling the benefits of the colonies to both a European and colonist audience. Captain John Smith could be considered the first American author with his works: *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Happened in Virginia* (1608) and *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* (1624). Other writers of this manner included Daniel Denton, Thomas Ashe, William Penn, George Percy, William Strachey, Daniel Coxe, Gabriel Thomas, and John Lawson. The religious disputes that prompted sett