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**The Road to Subjectivation: Women Captives at
the American Frontier**

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I.

Indian captivity narratives report on the ordeals of white settlers seized by Native Americans in response to Anglo encroachment threatening indigenous life and culture. The victims were commonly women, and older children, while men's captivity often ended in death. The forcible removal of women from the private sphere of WASP society characterized by "sexual inequality, unremunerated work, and seething discontent"¹ not only resulted in the crossing of literal frontiers, but also implied the trespassing of cultural and ethno-racial barriers. The captivity experience frequently coincided with personal trauma and a loss of identity. The concept of subjectivation, or, the achievement of subject status in relation to contemporary power, along with the respective gaps and its two subtypes, performativity and performance offer a research apparatus in which investigate how women captives reconstructed their lost selves.

The purpose of this paper is to retrace the main stages of the subjectivation process of Indian captives at the North American frontier. This will be realized via the examination of three texts considered mainstays of the captivity narrative genre. A framework utilizing the ideas of Michel Foucault, Enikő Bollobás, Émile Bienveniste, Louis Althusser, and Judith Butler is employed to explore selected examples of confinement reports in an attempt to retrace the major milestones in the respective identity rebuilding effort and subjectivation process. Furthermore, I will investigate how the protagonists either defied or confirmed mainstream stereotypes in responding to the gaps revealed in the power structure of the Native American captors. The inquiry focuses on the narratives of Mary Rowlandson (*The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), Hannah Dustan (*A Narrative of Hannah Dustan's Notable Delivery from Captivity in Mather's Decennium Luctuosum*, 1699), and Rachel Plummer, "A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer" (1838). First, I briefly describe the main features of the given genre, provide the historical context of the texts, I then introduce the relevant theoretical background, before undertaking the respective analysis.

¹ Joan B. Landes, "Introduction," in *Feminism, The Public and the Private*. ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

II.

The genre of the Indian captivity narrative commemorates the experiences of women forcibly taken from their frontier home. This form of narrative spans three centuries starting in 1682 with the publication of the Rowlandson Narrative and culminating in the first half of the nineteenth century.

These accounts are among the first representatives of autobiographical writing at the frontier and played a very important role in American literary history and as such they provide an excellent ground for my inquiry. As John Barbour highlighted, the two principal forms of American autobiography are the captivity narrative and the slave narrative.² While the research focus here is on the female-authored autobiography, a variety of life writing texts have been produced. The American version of the genre includes narratives of explorers, spiritual narratives of the colonial period, the Indian captivity narrative, the Barbary Coast narrative, the slave narrative, and multicultural and ethnic narratives.

According to Roy Harvey Pearce, the captivity narratives served three purposes: they functioned as justifications for the Westward Expansion and further encroachment on Indian land, offered the means of anti-Indian and in some cases anti-French propaganda, and defended the Puritan faith.³

Consequently, the texts emphasize religious aspects as they functioned as a form of conversion narrative while promoting the Puritan ideology: the white settlers despite their being targeted maintained their faith in God thereby asserting their moral superiority over Native Americans. The religious experience and personal testimonial of faith was the first form of American expression. They all supported the basic idea of John Winthrop's famous concept of the "city upon a hill" expressed in his "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630). This trope not only laid the foundations of American exceptionalism, the idea that Americans are a separate breed to whom the laws of history do not apply, but placed a tremendous burden on the colonists, or later Americans. Namely, being a member of an exemplary community, they had to behave as such, and any shortcomings in this regard caused major personal crises as attested in the journals of John Winthrop or Jonathan Edwards. Mary Rowlandson is the author of one of the best-known captivity narratives: *The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD, together with the Faithfulness of his Promises displayed: being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

² Susan Juster et al, "Forum: Religion and Autobiographical Writing," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 9, no. 1, (1999):1.

³ Roy Harvey Pearce, "The Significances of the Captivity Narrative," *American Literature*, 19, no.1 (1947): 9.

(1682). It commemorates eleven weeks of confinement among the Wampanoag Indians. Mrs. Rowlandson, the wife of a Puritan minister, Joseph Rowlandson was captured after her settlement, Lancaster was attacked during King Philip's War in February 1675. King Philip, or Metacomet, had united three Indian tribes into a confederation and waged a war against the settlers to respond to the encroachment on native land and the undermining of indigenous culture. The narrative displays the three structural elements identified by Richard VanDerBeets: separation, transformation, and return. While Mrs. Rowlandson initially refuses any communication or interaction with the Indians, her response changes as a consequence of her captors helping to bury her daughter Sarah, her becoming accustomed to Native food, and through her performing productive labor; as a result of these events she gradually rebuilds her broken self and displays a partial identification with her captors.

Hannah Dustan is captured after the attack on Haverhill Massachusetts by Abenaki Indians on March 15, 1697, during King William's War (1688-1697). Being bedridden, she was nursing her eighth child with only the assistance of a nurse, named Mary Neff. Although her husband rushed home to save the family, on seeing Hannah's condition he rescued the other seven children. Hannah and her infant, along with Mary, and twenty more settlers were taken by the Indians. After the Abenaki murdered Hannah's child, she took brutal revenge as Dustan, Neff, and a young captive ambushed their sleeping guards killing them, subsequently taking their scalps. Upon their return the governor of Massachusetts awarded fifty dollars for the ten scalps.

Rachel Plummer became the captive of Indians after the Comanche attacked her settlement Parker's Fort on the Texas frontier in May 1836. While her narrative contains similar elements to that of Mrs. Rowlandson's in so far as she is taken with her child, loses her infant to Indian brutality, and eventually gains her freedom, unlike Mrs. Rowlandson she never gives up her ethnocentric WASP point of view and her report is dominated by the permanent rejection and hatred of her captors.

The main concern of any autobiography or autobiographer is the subject himself or herself, in other words, the subjectivation process. The individual becomes a subject during the process of encountering power. According to the post-structuralist view the subject is not a defined, stable concept, but a fluid, shapeable entity in the state of continuous inscription.⁴

⁴ Nóra Séllei, *Tükröm, tükröm... Írónők önéletrajzai a 20. század elejétől* (Debrecen: Orbis Litterarum, 2001) 10.

Furthermore, Bollobás asserts that the subject is “a discursive construct [...] a catachresis,” in other words “a metaphor without a referent,”⁵ and Benveniste, a structural linguist holds that “language provides the very definition of man,”⁶ and considers language as a catalyst toward achieving subject status.

Bollobás also argues that the subjectivation process can be either performance or performative. As she posits, subjects are created in the acts of speaking and doing, thus via performative acts with ontological force. Performativity refers to the construction of new subjectivities via acting against the prevailing social scripts and expectations, while performance implies “mimetic replaying of norms and replaying of ruling ideologies when constructing the subject”.⁷

Along with autobiographical literature emerges the question of power, that is, how the subject is constituted in relation to the contemporary power. Subjectivation has a dual connotation referring to an individual or person becoming a subject to a given power on the one hand, and progressing from an object status to that of a conscious agent, an entity with the capability of shaping his or her fate on the other.

Foucault identifies two forms of the construction of subjectivity. Accordingly, he distinguishes between subjection producing the passive subject implying subordination or submission to the given regime of power and subjectivation resulting in the active subject via a “process by which one obtains the constitution of a subject, [...] which is obviously only one of the given possibilities for organizing self-consciousness.”⁸ He also recognizes gaps along the heterogeneous surface of power as the motivators of subject formation while testifying to the feasibility of the latter via confession in relation to the pastoral power. Consequently, the captivity narrative can be considered as a type of confession for perceived or assumed sins, or for negligent fulfilment of religious duties. At the same time resonating with Foucault’s subjection theory, Althusser’s idea of interpellation: a process during which “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects”⁹ implies the presence of the passive subject.

⁵ Enikő Bollobás, *They Aren’t, Until I Call Them* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 84.

⁶ Émile Benveniste, “Subjectivity in Language.” in *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 224.

⁷ Bollobás, *They Aren’t, Until I Call Them*, 21.

⁸ Mark G. E. Kelly, *The Political Philosophy of Michel Foucault*. (New York: Routledge, 2009) <https://books.google.hu/books?id=FNyPAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT126&lpg=PT126&dq=assujettissement+Foucault+english&source=bl&ots=wgONUjZZzh&sig=lfmgJ2mKrOsj6eCHsMZpfGdpbU&hl=hu&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewjMi-2PpK3ZAhVBuhQKHWHiA34Q6AEITDAD#v=onepage&q=assujettissement%20Foucault%20english&f=false>

⁹ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (Monthly Review Press, 1971), 115.

In the case of captivity stories another issue is raised, the reliability of the narrator, or in Butler's words, the ability to give an account of oneself. One way to give an account of oneself is through a narrative of a life, or autobiography. Butler challenges the possibilities of self-narration and the constitution of the self. She casts doubts on the ability to answer questions about oneself. The main question the author poses: "Does the subject who is not self-grounding, that is whose conditions of emergence can never fully be accounted for, undermine the possibility of giving an account of oneself?"¹⁰ In other words, can we assume responsibility and give an account of ourselves if we are oblivious to where we came from, of who we are? Butler suggests that there is no possibility of a complete account.

The narratives of Mary Rowlandson, Rachel Plummer, and Hannah Dustan provide excellent illustrations of the various forms of subject formation. Foucault's dual model of subjectivation, namely becoming a subordinated subject and one with agency can be matched with Bollobás' concept of performance and performativity respectively. Accordingly, the texts under analysis here show both variations.

Women captives often started their ordeal showing a performance, that is, acting according to current social requirements (scripts) describing the captivity experience from the point of view of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant society while upholding the given stereotypical descriptions of Native Americans.

Rowlandson's description of Native Americans in a negative way calling them "wolves," "ravenous Beasts,"¹¹ "wild beast of the forest," or "barbarous Enemy"¹² in the beginning of her account later changed into a more understanding attitude as she depicted them with less derogatory more lenient adjectival phrases such as "roaring Lyons" or "Salvage Bears."¹³

Rowlandson confesses that the reason for finding herself in captivity is that she was not pious enough in her everyday life. She deserved her punishment for disappointing God with her misbehavior. Still she receives God's grace demonstrating the immense mercy of the Lord:

I then remembered how careless I had been of Gods holy time; how many Sabbaths I had lost and mispent, and how evily I had walked in Gods sight; which lay so close unto my spirit, that it was easie for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off

¹⁰ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 19.

¹¹ Mary Rowlandson, "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God," in *Held Captive by Indians. Selected Narratives. 1642-1836*, ed. Richard VanDerBeets (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 45.

¹² Rowlandson, "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God," 46.

¹³ Rowlandson, "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God," 84.

the thread of my life, and cast me out of his presence for ever. Yet the Lord still shewed mercy to me, and upheld me; and as he wounded me with one hand, so he healed me with the other.¹⁴

Capture is considered as submission, the captive is put under Indian control. Rowlandson described her abduction: “like a company of Sheep torn by Wolves.”¹⁵

The basic motifs of the narratives are the journey from sinner to saint, encountering God and the devil sometimes physically, such as with pain in the body, like in case of Rachel Plummer who is often tied up tight, whipped, and beaten with clubs: “my flesh was never well from bruises and wounds during my captivity.”¹⁶ Another motif is the transformation of the self, which as Calvinism holds was originally burdened with sin and that a traumatic event such as captivity among heathens led to conversion, or a wholesale acceptance of the doctrines of Puritanism.

Autobiography is not only a documentation of the author’s religion in life but it is a religious act, according to Barbour. Thus it functions as an attempt to perceive the important role of God in one’s life and from this perspective to reorient the values of the author, the readers, the religious traditions, and American culture in general.¹⁷ The conclusion that Rowlandson draws from her experience is simply explained in this quote: “we must rely on God Himself, and our whole dependence must be upon Him.”¹⁸

Rowlandson also encounters the regime of power when she asks for a day of rest due to the Sabbath: “I told them it was the Sabbath day, and desired them to let me rest, and I told them I would do as much more to-morrow; to which they answered me, they would break my face.”¹⁹

The same idea appears in her lament of being abandoned in her faith: “The Indians were as thick as the trees: it seemed as if there had been a thousand Hatchets going at once: if one looked before one, there was nothing but Indians, and behind one, nothing but Indians, and so on other hand, I myself in the midst, and no Christian soul near me.”²⁰ At the same time Rowlandson, describing herself as the lone Christian among the heathen

¹⁴ Rowlandson, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” 48.

¹⁵ Rowlandson, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” 45.

¹⁶ Rachel Plummer, “A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer, Written by Herself.” in *Held Captive by Indians. Selected Narratives. 1642-1836*, ed. Richard VanDerBeets (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 337.

¹⁷ Hisayo Ogushi, “A Legacy of Female Imagination. Lydia Maria Child and the Tradition of Indian Captivity Narrative.” *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* 15, (2004): 13.

¹⁸ Rowlandson “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” 90.

¹⁹ Rowlandson, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” 54.

²⁰ Rowlandson, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” 55.

subjectivates herself to a transcendent power as according to Althusser in order for one to identify as a Christian one must already be a subject.

Althusser argues that the subject is created through interpellation or the hailing process, during which, the state either relying on a repressive apparatus or an ideological one addresses the individual. He considers interpellation a procedure during which ideology constructs the individual as a subject. Althusser's Marxist terminology, (class struggle, hegemony, exploitation) and the term *ideological state apparatus* can be applied to colonial New England promoting the notion of chosenness, predestination, and the covenant. Rowlandson was hailed or addressed twice: once by the WASP male society, and once by the Indians. In both cases she was subordinated, but she rebuilt her identity and achieved subjecthood against the Indians and in some sense the WASP male dominated state.

The ideological state apparatus differs from the repressive state apparatus in that people are not forced to accept it but are socialized into it. In the case of Rowlandson, she is a Puritan, thus is socialized to believe in the covenant, that is, she has a contract with God. She was socialized into that by the church and even her husband, as Joseph Rowlandson was a minister. Thus, the act of being captured by Indians can be imagined as an interpellation, that is the Indian tribe places the captive in a subordinate position.

The Rachel Plummer narrative contains the elements of performance as well. The Indian attack is described as a cowardly act full of cruelty, thereby reinforcing the negative stereotyping of Native Americans. The feigned friendliness throws the settlers of Fort Parker "off their guard,"²¹ and instead of making a treaty they engage in the "work of death."²² Plummer's observation upon being carried away reflects Foucault's subjectivation as subordination to a regime of power: "As I was leaving, I looked back at the place where I was one hour before, happy and free, and now in the hands of a ruthless, savage enemy."²³ The depiction of the Indians killing her newborn with unheard of cruelty also promotes anti-Indian propaganda.

The conscious subject status of the captive women is often achieved through performative acts. Mrs. Rowlandson defies her stereotype for instance when she is removed from her private sphere into the Native American public sphere, becomes accustomed to the harsh environmental circumstances in the wilderness, and begins engaging in productive work within the Native American community. The achievement of subject status is

²¹ Plummer, "A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer, Written by Herself," 335.

²² Plummer, "A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer, Written by Herself," 337.

²³ Plummer, "A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer, Written by Herself," 337.

further implied by her overcoming of the respective harsh conditions and the resultant more accommodating feeling for the wilderness: "They gave me a pack, and along we went cheerfully."²⁴ Moreover, producing the narrative itself is a performative act as at that time women did not write stories; in fact she was the first woman to publish her experiences of American colonial history.

During an altercation, Rachel Plummer fights back against an aggressive squaw and gains the respect of the Indian chief: "You are brave to fight— good to a fallen enemy—you are directed by the Great Spirit."²⁵ Yet the very functions of the narratives, especially defending the Puritan faith and the anti-Indian propaganda, even if indirectly, indicate a performance. The patriarchal WASP male-dominated frontier community viewed women as a weaker sex and the romantic paternalist attitude emphasizing the need to defend female virtue assigns women the role as victims of Indian cruelty. The emphasis on the female captive as a mother, originally restricted in the private sphere is especially discernible in both the Dustan and Plummer narratives.

Another focus of the Indian captivity narrative is the struggle to obtain agency, that is the ability of the person to shape her own life and destiny. The accounts describe the white settlers' main concern to define their own identities while expressing their faith in God and meeting the other, the Native Americans, in other words, outlining the religious dimensions of individualism. The captive woman is struggling for agency as the only means to survive in the wilderness. She transgresses racial borders and finds herself in a lawless place out of the bounds of the Puritan community. Although in such a space Rowlandson, Plummer, or Dustan suffer, still it is the place where they become self-aware and self-made women, whereas within their original community they are expected to be in a partially subordinated position as pious and humble people.

In these accounts of captivity, subjectivation can be interpreted in both Foucauldian ways. The first type of subjectivation implies being subordinated to another's control, while the second involves overseeing oneself or being conscious of one's identity. According to the latter, the captive taking charge of herself achieves subject status. Rowlandson participates in the negotiation for her release and sets the amount of her ransom. Foucault also asserts that subjectivation is created through the gaps in the wall of the regime of power, so power is not homogenous. In case of Rowlandson the road to agency is opened by getting a Bible and writing her story on its pages. The Bible becomes a solace for her and helps her make sense of the happenings, as she puts it: "My Guide by day,

²⁴ Rowlandson, "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God," 71.

²⁵ Plummer, "A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer, Written by Herself," 353.

and my Pillow by night.”²⁶ In effect, Hannah Dustan created an Indian identity when she managed to escape from her captors using their own method by killing and scalping them. In her case it was through violence that her agency came about. A physical or actual gap in the regime of power appears in this instance as after catching her abductors off guard she can murder them and escape.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point to the primary role of experience in subject formation. The milestones that are emphasized by the captive women help them to achieve subject status. Thus when Rowlandson refuses to smoke with King Philip, or sews for the tribe, and Plummer fights with the squaw, or Dustan takes revenge on her captors by scalping them, such experiences reinforce the achievement of subject status.

Butler says that one way to give an account of oneself is through a narrative of a life, or autobiography. However, her main question is: can we really give an account of ourselves, is it reliable or not? The authors of the Indian captivity narratives are giving an account of themselves, they are writing their autobiographies. The adventures of Hannah Dustan are commemorated or narrated by Cotton Mather, an unreliable narrator, a fact which denies the very foundation of the genre, the ability to provide a reliable personal account. Moreover, since giving an account of oneself, like in the case of Rowlandson, is undertaken along the externally imposed norms and guidelines of the WASP-dominated society, such an account can only be partial at best.

III.

This paper has illustrated that the road to subject status is far from clearly defined. Subjectivation is more than the achievement of identity, as the fluctuating aspect of the subject is well illustrated by Foucault’s multiple interpretation or Althusser’s notion of interpellation. The captivity narratives prove that subjectivation takes place via both language and action, yet the very process has to be commemorated in writing testifying to the heretofore (partially) objectified and muted white woman gaining the power of expression. Consequently, in Joan B. Landes’ words, the author of the Indian captivity narrative uses “public language to express private despair.”²⁷ One becomes a subject in context of the Self, that is, one refutes his or her original status as the objectified Other and strives for the power of agency and expression. In the context of female-authored captivity narratives, it is the white woman forced into the private sphere of the WASP (M) society and

²⁶ Rowlandson, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God,” 67.

²⁷ Landes, *Feminism, The Public and the Private*, 1.

deprived of the expressive and political power required for the existence of the subject²⁸ that qualifies as the Other against the white male Self. While the above discussed texts display various routes to subjectivity including overcoming one's personal and physical limits implied by Rowlandson or engaging in violence in self-defense or revenge in the cases of the Plummer and Dustan texts, respectively, they are considered significant milestones on the road leading toward the inscription of women into the society and culture of North America.

²⁸ András Tarnóc, "Énteremtés és érvessztés a szabadulástörténetekben—A szubjektum szerveződése Mary Rowlandson fogságnaplójában." in *A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum*. Szerk: Séllei Nóra. (Debrecen: Orbis Litterarum, 2007), 125.

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