

“Así, yo lo tomé el leme”: Navigating Masculine Power and Liminal Space in *Naufragios* (1542) by Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca

JOSHUA D. MARTIN, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

“Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles.”

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La frontera*

Introduction

More than three hundred years before the 1848 signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and long before Gloria Anzaldúa appropriately termed the U.S.-Mexico border an open wound, Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca published in 1542 the first Spanish-language account of the present-day U.S.-Mexico borderlands.¹ Detailing many of the cultural idiosyncrasies of various Native American tribes, *Naufragios*, as the account was later retitled, traces Núñez’s journey from his experiences in Florida as a member of the Narváez expedition, through the present-day U.S. Southwest, and ultimately to Mexico. In the 500 years since the publication of this now canonical Spanish-language text, scholars have approached the account in diverse ways. Juan Francisco Maura, for example, proposes that *Naufragios* functions as literary fiction more so than historical truth, and that readers should remain conscious of the influence of then popular Spanish literary genres.² Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, meanwhile, maintains that the

¹ Commenting on the legacy of the illegal Anglo invasion of Texas in the mid 1800s, Gloria Anzaldúa identifies the U.S. / Mexico border as an open wound, “una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (*Borderlands* 25) while a borderland, in her view, serves as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). For more information about Anzaldúa’s vision of the U.S./Mexico border and its colonial legacy, consult chapters one and two of her book *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

² Paying special attention to the demanding circumstances Núñez encounters and affirming the influence of the “Libros de Caballería” in the 16th century (“Introducción” 39), Francisco Maura contends that “[s]i bien [Núñez] no pudo llegar a ser un ‘héroe’ en el sentido más amplio de la palabra, ya que su expedición

account bears witness to a “dislocation of imperial subjectivity, since the narrative is the crisis of the colonizer as representative of the king” (“Beyond Merit” 72). While *Naufragios* has garnered attention for its use of religious imagery and its documentation of Spanish and Native American cultural exchange, little attention has been given to the text’s treatment of masculinity construction, as well as the attendant hierarchies and claims to power that shape the actions of the subjects described therein. Specifically, scholars have neglected to analyze how the construction of an exemplary Messianic masculine code and its corresponding modes of power and performance operate within the liminal space of the American Southwest as they are represented throughout the text.³

By understanding masculinity construction as relational and performative, as well as homosocial and place-based, I argue that the literary Núñez employs Messianic exemplarity from a subordinate position as outsider in order to advance a superordinate position of masculine power against the violence and inaptitude of the other men described throughout the text.⁴ I propose that the Messianic imagery operates as a strategic masculine resource within the American Southwest, and that this desert, liminal terrain works to legitimize a masculine code of passivity and healing that Núñez crafts to the disadvantage of the other allegedly violent and indolent men he encounters. Questions of gender and identity thus become central to our reading of the account. Gender scholar Judith Butler affirms that any gender

resultó en fracaso y no hubo oportunidad de mostrar su valor y arrojo en ninguna batalla singular, sí pudo crearse la imagen de ‘héroe’ en su dimensión más ‘cristiana’” (53).

³ In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha defines liminal or “in-between” spaces as zones that “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (1). While Bhabha affirms that such a space “opens up the possibility for cultural hybridity,” (4) I relate the concept of an ‘in-between space’ to the American Southwest in order to demonstrate how Núñez uses the distant, desert terrain as an ideal backdrop for the Christ pastiche he creates for himself in order to contest the existing masculine codes of the other men present throughout the region.

⁴ I relate Núñez’s “Messianic masculinity” to his miracle-working, passivity, and poverty in opposition to the supposed violence and/or incompetence of his male counterparts. More importantly, though, I emphasize that Núñez, like Christ Himself, achieves a position of power through a seemingly subordinate position, and in this regard, I agree with New Testament scholar Brittany E. Wilson in her reading of masculinity construction regarding the Christ figure in Luke-Acts. In her book *Unmanly men*, Wilson contends that as the proverbial “suffering servant,” Christ represents “a passive, rejected figure who at times betrays emotion and whose corporeal boundaries are repeatedly violated” (192). Wilson contends that the Christ figure deconstructs “the protocols of elite masculinity” (193), that that, furthermore, He “is conceived without male penetrative power, and, as a sexual ascetic, he does not exercise his own penetrative power” (196). Such convention-defying acts, in Wilson’s view, affirm a masculine code that guarantees victory “only through defeat” (235). As Wilson herself states, “God’s power in Jesus the ‘Lord’ is paradoxically powerless, for this ‘Lord’ only triumphs by losing” (241).

performance operates through an exclusionary logic (*Bodies* 8).⁵ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall extends Butler's insight by arguing that all claims to identity likewise employ methods of exclusion in order to maintain forms of identification ("Identity" 2).⁶ Understanding both gender and identity accordingly aids our reading of *Naufragios* by showcasing how Núñez, through his Christ pastiche, reappropriates power from a supposedly subordinate position that entails feminine duties.

Occurring largely in the borderless American Southwest, *Naufragios* also highlights the liminal spatial dynamics that allow its author to invoke Christ-like exemplarity as a means to negotiate local power and increment his own authority by counteracting the masculine performances of his male counterparts. Thus, as the narrative progresses, Núñez crafts a superordinate position of masculine power from the seemingly subordinate position of a hungry and naked outsider. The account's frequent recourse to damning binaries (benevolent Spaniard / ignorant native) underpins this masculine code and allows Núñez to reappropriate masculine agency by deriding the local natives. By invoking humility, hunger, nakedness, poverty, and bodily pain, Núñez posits hallmarks of the Christian Messiah at the very center of a highly nuanced masculine guise, allowing him to consolidate power within the desert region by contrasting his own exemplarity with the alleged ferocity and indolence of the other men he encounters.

Making the Man: Crafting Exemplary Masculinity in *Naufragios*

The question of identity in many ways undergirds the performance of 'licit' masculinities and femininities in opposition to their 'illicit' alternatives. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler describes gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-4). What, then, is masculinity? Emphasizing the relational and historically contingent nature of masculine codes, R.W. Connell contends, "No masculinity arises except in a system of gender relations" and that masculinity "is simultaneously a place in

⁵ In the introduction to her book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler affirms that "the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation" (8, author's emphasis).

⁶ Drawing from Michel Foucault's assertion that scholars should work to determine the effects of discursive practice, Hall proposes that identification "is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" ("Identity" 2).

gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (71).⁷ Masculinity scholar Michael Kimmel underscores the mimetic infrastructure of masculinities by positing homosociality as a key component to masculine performance (*Manhood* 7), and sociologist James Messerschmidt, in a similar vein, argues that masculinities operate along, and are organized through, hierarchical orders of gendered social praxes informed by race, class, and sexuality, among other factors (*Nine Lives* 7-13). According to Messerschmidt, masculine performances entail accountability to one’s peers since their enactments reflect and/or contribute to the construction of specific types of gendered knowledge and expectations (*Nine Lives* 7-13). An understanding of masculinity as performative and relational, as well as historically contingent and homosocial, allows us to identify how Núñez capitalizes upon his subordinate position in the American Southwest through the stylized guise of a Spanish miracle-worker. Before analyzing the masculine power dynamics present within *Naufragios*, however, we must first take into consideration the motivating forces behind the production of the text, what immediate purposes the account served, as well as to what specific historical contingencies Núñez was responding at the time of his writing.⁸

In their introductory essay, Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz trace Núñez’s lineage of explorers and war veterans as well as his own experiences as a sixteenth century Spanish male *andaluz*.⁹ Initially taking the form of a conquest narrative,

⁷ In their essay “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt specify that masculine codes also form through the negation of any real or perceived femininity. As they themselves argue, “Gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model (whether real or imaginary) or femininity” (848).

⁸ In her essay, “Nuevas perspectivas en los estudios coloniales hispanoamericanos,” Rolena Adorno argues that, in addition to considering a colonial text’s content, the reader must also analyze the ideological forces behind the production of the text in question. According to Adorno, colonial texts often if not always reflect the performances consonant with the multiple subject positions of its author (14). Pointing to Alonso Fernández’s *Historia eclesiástica de nuestros tiempos* (1611) as just one example, Adorno calls attention to a paradigm “que posible y típicamente opera dentro del discurso colonial, es decir, una simultaneidad de varias posiciones del sujeto exigidas por las diversas facetas (político-administrativa, religioso-teológica, etc.) del proyecto del colonialismo” (14).

⁹ Adorno and Pautz contend that the author’s lineage as well as his own experiences attest to the fact that “life in provincial Andalusia for a man of military tradition and vocation was likely to be anything but confined to local affairs. At the end of his account he lauded his paternal grandfather, Pedro de Vera Mendoza, by identifying him as the conqueror of the island of Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands. His maternal lineage, whose name of Cabeza de Vaca he bore, dated back at least as far as the early thirteenth century. *Caballeros*, or members of the untitled middle-ranking nobility, of the Cabeza de Vaca line had participated in the ‘reconquest’ of Spain from the Muslims. Fernán Ruiz Cabeza de Vaca’s chronicled participation in the Christian conquest of Córdoba in 1235 ... links the Cabeza de Vaca name with one of the major military offensives of its era” (“Introduction” 3).

Naufragios, according to Adorno and Pautz, exhibits the desire on the part of Núñez and his contemporaries to seek wealth and prestige in the Americas—an ambition catalyzed in particular by the 1523 and 1525 publications of Hernán Cortés’s third and fourth New World *relaciones* (“Introduction” 3-9). The conquest narratives that often followed such New World encounters served as a popular literary mode during the sixteenth century in part because, as Juan Francisco Maura contends, such narratives acted as “la simbiosis de una cultura renacentista pujante, con una realidad tan cercana a lo ‘maravilloso’ lo que hace que se conjuguen en una sola obra la imaginación y la propia experiencia” (“Introducción” 36). In addition to securing a reading audience by juxtaposing “la estética mitológica frente al realismo conciso” (Francisco Maura 37), this carefully crafted narrative model operated in the case of Núñez Cabeza de Vaca as a necessarily compensatory tool that responded to, and attempted to justify, a seemingly failed exploratory mission.

To this end, I concur with Kathryn Mayers in her observation that throughout *Naufragios*, Núñez “undertakes a strategy of substitution, “and that rather than relate findings of precious metals, he offers in their place “geographic and ethnographic information” that complements his authoritative narrative voice (“Of Third Spaces” 5). To understand why such a performance of Messianic exemplarity served as a viable masculine resource, it is fruitful to keep in mind the immediate purposes to which the text responded. Adorno and Pautz highlight that Núñez failed to acquire the governorship of Florida as he had wished since it was granted, instead, to Hernando de Soto in early 1537 (“Introduction” 24). Compensating for this and other perceived failures, Núñez crafts his account with a strategically masculinist scope, testifying at different times to his strength, endurance, and cunningness in light of demanding geography, the supposed incompetence of his fellow Spanish compatriots, and the allegedly ubiquitous violence of the natives he encounters. As Adorno and Pautz argue, Núñez fashioned his account “as a kind of ‘narrative curriculum vitae’ in support of his petition for another royal contract for exploration and conquest in the Indies”(24-5). As the analysis here demonstrates, the negotiation and reappropriation of masculine power operates as a strategic mechanism within *Naufragios* since Núñez’s claims to authority, exemplarity, and competency in the Southwest mediate the information that he remits.¹⁰

¹⁰ While Adorno and Pautz have taken note of the importance of dominant ideologies in colonial texts, Margarita Zamora reminds readers that these ideologies also determine what was considered historical truth. In her article “Historicity and Literariness,” Zamora contends that during the colonial period, historical truth was determined from within the confines of ideology, and that such ideology was often buttressed by “the authority of the Christian and classical traditions” (338). Rather than analyze colonial

Addressing the then King of Spain Charles V in the dedicatory section of *Naufragios*, Núñez inscribes within his account a double authority. On the one hand, the author safeguards his text against any potential claims that his account borders on ahistoricity or the fantastic.¹¹ In addition, Núñez narrates his experiences through a discursive mode that affirms Spanish superiority in binary opposition to the natives with whom he had lived, maintaining that his account documents “las diversas costumbres de muchas y muy bárbaras naciones con quien conversé y viví, y todas las otras particularidades que pude alcanzar y conocer” so that ultimately the king himself “en alguna manera ... será servido” (76). While the account initially reads cautionary and defensive, it also establishes a damning narrative trope with respect to the Native Americans, the efficacy of which increases as Núñez augments his own masculine exemplarity among, and against, the natives.

Writing with regards to the exclusionary and gendered nature of identity categories, Stuart Hall correctly argues that identities develop through discursive matrices and “emerge within the play of specific modalities of power” (“Identity” 4). Far from acting as originary or monolithic ideals, identities, according to Hall, draw upon the “endlessly performative” nature pursuant to discourse while at the same time respecting the “specific historical and institutional sites” from which individual subjectivities can and do emerge (1, 4). To this end, Hall, referencing gender theorist Judith Butler, notes the gender dynamics implicit in these claims and adds that identities, like gender categories, “operate through exclusion ... [as well as through] the production of abjected and marginalized subjects” (15).¹² The polyvalent nature inherent to identity categories underscores the dynamism of Núñez’s ever-changing subject position throughout the text. Explorer, captive, miracle-worker—these and

documents at the purely textual level, scholars should, in Zamora’s view, interrogate how the cultural category of literature responds to and emerges from a writer’s specific milieu: “[T]he category of literature is an ideological product of a particular historical moment. Changing social and cultural needs are usually accompanied by changes in the coordinates of the literary field. Thus, while the original typology of the text can be seen as a reflection of its context and syntactical characteristics, it is the social function of the text that ultimately determines its cultural classification” (336).

¹¹ Conscious of the seemingly fantastic elements that permeate his account, Núñez aims to curb suspicion by affirming that he has written his account “con tanta certinidad, que aunque en ella se lean algunas cosas muy nuevas, y para algunos muy difíciles de creer, pueden sin duda crearlas” (76).

¹² Writing with respect to the link between identity categories and their gendered counterparts, Judith Butler maintains that “the very possibility of becoming a viable subject requires that a certain gender mime be already underway. The ‘being’ of the subject is no more self-identical than the ‘being’ of any gender; in fact, coherent gender, achieved through an apparent repetition of the same, produces as its effect the illusion of a prior and volitional subject” (“Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” 130).

other positions demand distinct performances in opposition to masculine rivals according to each specific milieu in which Núñez must navigate.¹³

The religious tropes that structure the narrative and its ever-shifting power dynamics manifest themselves within the opening pages of the text and function as central mechanisms in the formation of masculine exemplarity. In the first chapter of *Naufragios*, Núñez resorts to rhetorical strategies symptomatic of Spanish explorer accounts in order to describe the beginnings of the Narváez mission, representing his leader, for example, as a man “con poder y mandado de Vuestra Majestad para conquistar y gobernar las provincias” (77). While Núñez affirms the superordinate position of Narváez, he criticizes his fellow compatriots by questioning their bravery if only to then affirm his own. None but Núñez, we read, dare leave the storm-tossed ship to fetch much-needed supplies, and he quickly reminds us that “con la ayuda de Dios,” he and his fellow Spaniards will not only survive these dubious conditions, but will also be able to attend Mass soon afterward (79).¹⁴ Núñez foregrounds his text within a European male Catholic paradigm that structures narrative imagery and informs, as we will later see, how he responds to his Native American counterparts, or “estos hombres tan sin razón y tan crudos” as he calls them in chapter XII (121).¹⁵

Continuing his use of religious language in chapter II, Núñez affirms the sacred nature of the Spanish expedition while also constructing a mythic base from which he develops his own masculine exemplarity. We read, for example, that the crew arrives at the Florida coast on April 12—Holy Thursday. While a cursory symbolic significance of this Christian holy day proves rather obvious at face value, the reader must recall that the day in question, in both the Western and Eastern Christian rites, inaugurates the Pascal Triduum—a three-day period that emphasizes the passion,

¹³ In their article “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt maintain that masculinities, far from operating as monolithic codes, are in fact highly varied and depend in large part on location and social norms, among numerous other factors: “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (836).

¹⁴ In this regard, I concur with Sandra Slater who, in her article concerning the motivating forces behind the execution of colonial masculinities, argues that “[c]ourage, as linked to danger, heroism and glory, became amplified in the New World where danger was inescapable. Those who failed to exhibit courage received insults that degraded them as being feminine or unmanly” (“Nought but Women” 32).

¹⁵ While *Naufragios* provides several examples of cultural exchange between Núñez and various Native American peoples, the “razón / sin razón” binary he employs against the latter is equally worth noting. Consider, for example, his description of the land and its people in chapter XIX: “y paréceme que sería tierra muy fructífera si fuese labrada y habitada de gente de razón” (149).

death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having already criticized the valor of his companions, Núñez cleverly juxtaposes the beginnings of the landed Spanish expedition alongside the holy day that commemorates both the suffering and exemplarity of the Christian Messiah. In so doing, the author foregrounds his text within a discursive mode that affirms the sanctity of the expedition while also establishing the male paradigm within which he will later create a superordinate masculine persona.

While the beginning of *Naufragios* makes clear the hierarchical chain of command of the Narváez expedition, it also calls our attention to the subversive mechanisms that Núñez undertakes so as to create a discursive space wherein he is able to negotiate masculine power. We have already witnessed how Núñez, on the one hand, affirms the authority of his leader if only to later highlight the cowardice of his compatriots. In chapter IV, the negotiation of masculine hierarchies continues. Here, readers encounter a disagreement among Núñez's compatriots regarding how and where the ships are to be docked. Arising within an exclusive circle of power composed of the governor, Núñez, and four other men, the dispute signals a disjuncture after which Núñez immediately counters the authority of his leader. Drawing recourse to the decrees of Spanish royalty, the author remarks, "Yo, vista su determinación, requeríle de parte de Vuestra Majestad que no dejase los navíos sin que quedasen en puerto y seguros" (89). Later, when asked to stay with the ships, Núñez again opposes the established hierarchy by highlighting the superiority of his own honor and the ensuing compulsion to act accordingly: "yo quería más aventurarme al peligro que él y los otros se aventuraban ... y mi honra anduviese en disputa; y que yo quería más aventurar la vida que poner mi honra en esta condición" (90). Having already cited the Spanish monarch, Núñez underscores the compulsory mechanism implicit within a Spanish code of masculine honor while at the same time criticizing his leader's lack of initiative. In so doing, Núñez lays the groundwork for the gradual undoing of his leader's authority—a process, as we shall soon see, that allows Núñez to increment his own power as the expedition draws further westward into rugged and unmapped terrain.

As the narrative progresses, Núñez highlights the fragmentation of his leader's command by calling our attention to his questionable leadership as the prospect of the expedition's success proves increasingly more dubious. In chapter X, for example, the expedition encounters "muchas canoas de indios" who carry with them two captured Spaniards, or "cristianos" to use Núñez's term (112). After the natives retreat, taking "los cristianos" with them, the expedition's boats are lost and no one in the expedition, we read, can see through the enveloping fog and increasing

darkness. Núñez, however, cleverly utilizes these nebulous circumstances to bring to light Narváez's reticence as to what course of action he should undertake. In so doing, Núñez questions Narváez's efficacy as leader while also negotiating the once-stable power dynamics:

Como amaneció, cada barca se halló por sí perdida de las otras ... y siguiendo mi viaje a hora de vísperas vi dos barcas, y como fui a ellas, vi que la primera a que llegué era la del gobernador, el cual me preguntó qué me parecía que debíamos hacer. Yo le dije que debía recobrar aquella barca que iba delante, y que en ninguna manera la dejase, y que juntas todas tres barcas, siguiésemos nuestro camino donde Dios nos quisiese llevar. (113-4)

By signaling the indecisiveness and reticence of the expedition's leader, the text highlights a discursive space in which power dynamics shift in favor of Núñez—the only subject, we read, who offers a concrete plan of action.

Chapter X evidences the increasingly more salient “yo” of the textual Núñez at the same time that the latter displaces the once-dominant power structures. Rather than fashion himself in the vein of oft-lauded conquistadors, though, Núñez instead constructs an exemplary masculine ideal by recourse to Messianic imagery and continues to do so as he draws further into the liminal space of the American Southwest. Uncharted and exempt from legislative oversight, the desert region affords Núñez a convenient backdrop against which he reappropriates masculine agency and interrogates gendered power by fashioning himself into a Christ pastiche.¹⁶ In the foregoing passage, we witness the once dominant governor vacillate, thereby creating the decisive moment in which Núñez appropriates masculine agency to his favor. The remaining passages of chapter X further corroborate the religious paradigm employed so as to alter local power and legitimize Núñez's masculine performance in opposition to his once revered leader. After Núñez has offered his plan of action, for example, Narváez responds in a way that, according to Núñez, seemingly dissolves the pre-existing hierarchy altogether: “[Narváez] me respondió que ya no era tiempo de mandar unos a otros; que cada uno hiciese lo que mejor le pareciese que era para salvar la vida; que él así lo entendía de hacer, y diciendo esto, se alargó con su barca” (114). By diametrically

¹⁶ Though writing with regards to her native Great Britain, geographer Doreen Massey makes several important comments that are helpful in our understanding of how Núñez utilizes geography in gendered terms. Affirming that “gender relations vary over space” (178), Massey proposes that spaces, places, and how we understand them “are gendered through and through,” and that the “gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live” (186).

opposing the resilient and decisive Núñez to the flippant and noncommittal Narváez, this passage underscores the dissolution of the expedition's hierarchy and, in so doing, signals the precise moment in which Núñez can effectively prove himself (in opposition to his former leader) by taking control of his own particular group of men.

By framing his proposed course of action within a Christian paradigm, Núñez juxtaposes his own leadership alongside the benevolence and mercy of the Christian God. The text makes this immediately apparent when Núñez, departing from his leader alongside two other captains, survives a storm “por gran misericordia que Dios tuvo de nosotros” if only to later take control of the expedition since the fears of the other men prevent them (unlike Núñez) from acting at all: “el maestre me dijo que yo tuviese cargo de [la barca], porque él estaba tal, que creía aquella noche morir. Así, yo lo tomé el leme” (115). In the space of two pages, Núñez counters the governor's authority, juxtaposes his own course of action alongside the mercy of the Christian God, and successfully consolidates power dynamics in favor of a new leader—himself. If masculinities entail hierarchies and homosociality, we must question, then, what role the male body plays in the representation and construction of Núñez's Messianic masculine script.

Bodies and Binaries

A key component in this reading of *Naufragios* centers upon the ties between gendered power, Messianic performance, and the male body. In her book chapter discussing the ties between discourse and power in *Naufragios*, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel proposes that the text offers its readers a “textual space in which the narrator is able to return to the colonial order by producing a narrative in which suffering becomes a service, and survival functions as a merit that must be acknowledged by the centers of imperial power” (“Beyond Merit and Failure” 73-4). I add, however, that understanding bodily suffering within the context of Messianic masculine performance allows us to better interrogate how and why the power dynamics in the text shift, ultimately operating to Núñez's advantage. What roles, then, does the male body play regarding masculinity construction and gender performance?

James Messerschmidt argues that questions concerning the male body inevitably center upon one's capacity for agency since bodies, as “agents of social practice,” exhibit social conduct within site-specific interactions that hold one accountable to

masculine performance (*Nine Lives* 93).¹⁷ Likewise, R.W. Connell, Tim Carrigan, and John Lee contend that the body functions “as an *object of practice*” and that men invest in bodily performances since corporeal reproductions of masculine behaviors stem from “a question of strategies” (“New Sociology” 595).¹⁸ If the post-Florida sections of *Naufragios* portray, as Martínez San Miguel affirms, “the gradual recovery of control over the American surroundings through the *translation and transformation* of the roles performed by the Spaniards in the indigenous societies” (“Beyond Merit” 83), readers must also question how the bodily descriptions in these passages supplement Núñez’s authority.¹⁹ In his study of hybridity and cultural formation, Homi K. Bhabha affirms that while the body is inscribed in “the economy of pleasure and desire,” it is also enmeshed within “the economy of discourse, domination and power” (*Culture* 67). By positing the male body as a strategic tool tied to claims of power, as well as a script where gender performances are both written and read, we are better able to interrogate how Núñez employs bodily suffering to his advantage by creating a Messianic model of masculinity.²⁰

Indeed, throughout *Naufragios*, Núñez frequently draws recourse to Messianic performance--humility, poverty, nakedness, passivity, and healing--to paradoxically affirm a position of power and authority from a menial subject position.²¹ In chapter XII, Núñez documents the precarity and hunger of those, himself included, who survive their ship’s sinking, and in so doing he employs the male body as a

¹⁷ In their article defending the concept of hegemonic masculinity, Messerschmidt and R. W. Connell elaborate the relation between the body and masculine performance by arguing, “Bodies participate in social action by delineating courses of social conduct,” and that as a result, the body both participates in and simultaneously generates social practice (“Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept” 851).

¹⁸ Italics are those of the authors.

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²⁰ Writing with regards to the text’s documentation of transculturation, Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel underscores Núñez’s ambivalence during the moments of cultural exchange that he documents: “Alvar does not become a *mestizo*, pro-Indian American subject, but he is also not a colonizing subject who is completely impervious to his experience of living for eight years outside his language and culture, and the political system in which he became a failed royal official. His syncretic and transculturating gestures, then, incorporate this constitutive sense of alteration and dislocation defining his process of cultural translation” (“Beyond Merit” 85).

²¹ While the Biblical examples of Christ’s attaining “superordinancy-through-subordinancy” are numerous, arguably one of the most important scenes occurs in the canonical gospels when Christ enters Jerusalem while riding a donkey, an act that in the Christian tradition can be viewed as symbolizing the humility of the Christian Messiah as well as His ministry of peace. The incident (found in St. Matthew 21: 1-11, St. Mark 11: 1-10, St. Luke 19: 28-40, and St. John 12: 12-19) fulfills the prophecy outlined in the Book of Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King comes to you; He is righteous and saving; He is gentle and mounted upon a donkey, even a young foal.” Brittany E. Wilson argues that the birth narrative prefigured in the Book of Zechariah foregrounds the “theme of reversal and God’s preference for the weak and lowly” (*Unmanly men* 83), and that the figure of Zechariah “prepares the way’ for Jesus’ reversal of masculine norms” (190).

physical site that testifies to his suffering and endurance: “Y como entonces era por noviembre, y el frío muy grande, y nosotros tales que con poca dificultad nos podían contar los huesos, estábamos hechos propia figura de la muerte. De mí sé decir que desde el mes de mayo pasado yo no había comido otra cosa sino maíz tostado ... más estábamos cerca de la muerte que de la vida” (120). The subsequent representation of the natives as brutish and emotionally weak only further entrenches a binary that favors Núñez’s subject position among the natives. After Núñez explains to the natives the details of the shipwreck and the loss of three of his men, Núñez then affirms that “comenzaron todos [los indios] a llorar recio” and that, furthermore, the weeping of these men--“estos hombres tan sin razón y tan crudos”--lasted more than half an hour (121). Núñez presents the natives as emotionally fragile—“a manera de brutos”—, mourning the losses of men with whom they share no linguistic, historical, or cultural connection.²² The discursive representation of the natives as subjects who are both emotionally weak and without reason nicely complements Núñez’s emphasis concerning his own survival strategies and endurance in a previously unexplored land that affords few material securities.

Similarly, in chapter XIX, Núñez juxtaposes his separation from “todos los cristianos” (his collective term identifying himself and all other European men) alongside the hunger and “mal tratamiento” that he received at the hands of the natives (148). Of equal importance is Núñez’s subtle yet clever description in chapter XXI relating his return to the “indios” and his fellow “cristianos” with resurrectionary imagery. Affirming that “Dios usó conmigo de misericordia,” Núñez recalls how he arrived at a riverbank “donde yo hallé a mis indios, que ellos y los cristianos me contaban ya por muerto... y nosotros dimos muchas gracias a nuestro Señor porque nunca nos faltaba remedio” (155). More importantly, though, the passage parallels the meeting between Christ and his disciples on the banks of the Jordan River, a point in the canonical gospels in which the divinity of Christ is affirmed and after which His authority is made evident when numerous men leave

²² This is not to say, however, that the text elides examples of transculturation. In her book chapter, “The First Fifty Years of Hispanic New World Historiography: the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America,” scholar Stephanie Merrim, writing with regards to *Naufrajios*, argues that “shipwrecks possess a rich literary history and are charged with symbolic possibilities, of rebirth of the individual and recreation of society,” and that, as such, Núñez’s account details a metaphoric rebirth “into Indian life” (87). Although the Spaniards are forced to adapt pre-existing native practices, Merrim correctly warns us that such forms of cultural adaptation do not negate the strategies that Núñez employs to bolster his own standing: “It is the entrepreneurial Indians, re-enacting certain of the worst aspects of the Spanish Conquest, who terrorize and plunder” (90). By employing these clever role-reversals, Núñez emphasizes “his fame and success in the Indian world,” knowing, argues Merrim, that such fame and success will influence “his fame and success in the world of the Spanish court” (90).

their day labors to follow His ministry.²³ By highlighting the shared disparity of the expedition as well as the journey's dramatic effects on the male body, *Naufragios* consolidates a homosocial community of men, both Native American and Spanish, while also invoking religious tropes that little by little supplement Núñez's own superordinancy. In his book concerning the construction of masculine codes, R.W. Connell argues that social phenomena, such as hierarchy, dominance, and exclusion, "are both realized and symbolized in bodily performances" (*Masculinities* 54). I argue that the text's continual emphasis on the male body corroborates this religious paradigm while also positioning the seemingly subordinate Núñez in a dominant position of power.²⁴ On a primary level, these bodily descriptions allow Núñez to further draw parallels between himself and the Christian Messiah, while on a secondary level they compensate—as his royal reading audience surely noticed—for the prolonged expedition's notable lack of material gain.

Consider, for example, Núñez's extended commentary in chapter XXII regarding the desert terrain and how he immediately relates his own hardships to that of Christ, who likewise lived, performed miracles, and suffered in a desert environment:

La tierra es tan áspera y tan cerrada, que muchas veces hacíamos leña de montes, que cuando la acabábamos de sacar nos corría por muchas partes sangre, de las espinas y matas con que topábamos, que nos rompían por donde alcanzaban. A las veces aconteció hacer leña donde, después de haberme costado mucha sangre, no la podía sacar ni acuestas ni arrastrando. No tenía, cuando estos trabajos me veía, otro remedio ni consuelo sino pensar en la pasión de nuestro redentor Jesucristo y en la sangre que por mí derramó, y considerar cuánto más sería el tormento de las espinas él padeció que no aquél que yo sufría. (162)

²³ The Gospel of St. Luke, for example, affirms that Christ began His ministry after His baptism in the Jordan River (St. Luke 3: 23), while St. John's gospel account details John the Baptist's affirmation of Christ's divinity (St. John 1: 34), later identifying a number of men who left their day laborers to follow Christ's ministry. The fourth chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew and the first chapter of the Gospel of St. Mark also detail Christ's baptism and the subsequent recruitment of male disciples. Readers should take special notice, too, that just as Christ's baptism in the Jordan River prefaces His ministry, recruitment of disciples, and working of various miracles in the canonical gospels, so too does Núñez's encounter with his European counterparts on the riverbank in chapter XXI prefigure the miracles he performs in chapter XXII.

²⁴ Writing with regards to the relation between the body and masculinity in the Christ figure, Brittany E. Wilson contends that, in St. Luke's gospel, "Jesus may be a 'man,' but he is a man who differs from other men, not only because he does not adhere to standards of manliness but because he is God in the flesh" (*Unmanly men* 200-01). In addition, Wilson affirms that, at least in St. Luke's writings, Christ's power is "tied to [His] resurrected, penetrated body" and that, even resurrected, Jesus still "bears the marks of his unmanly death" (239).

The representation of the male body as both a physical marker of endurance and a symbolic token of Christ-like exemplarity works to supplement Núñez's authority in the desert region--a process that culminates, as we shall see, with his healing practices and the subsequent fame it brings him among the natives.

By introducing these corporeal tropes nearly halfway through the narrative, Núñez disrupts the power dynamics between his own party and the natives, and by doing so, he creates a threshold wherein he negotiates power through Messianic discourse and performance in a liminal space that affords such creative license. By consistently underscoring his own poverty, nakedness, and hunger, Núñez further entrenches the parallels between himself and the Christian Messiah while also setting the stage for his future negotiation of local power dynamics through his healing powers. Instead of celebrating new cultural forms that proceed from the interactions of Europeans and Native Americans, and rather than extol the dominant gender codes of the native peoples, Núñez instead uses his experiences among the natives to bolster his own authority throughout the account. The effectiveness of these techniques reaches its zenith as Núñez navigates throughout the American Southwest, for it is here where Núñez employs this "in-between" desert space to alter gendered power by fashioning himself into a masculine exemplar.

Miracles and Masculinity: A Call to Performance in Liminal Space

An important though largely unexamined aspect of Nuñez's account concerns itself with the text's spatial dimensions and their relation to masculine power. Navigating through largely uncharted territory belonging to no one European imperial power, Núñez must perform, and maintain, his masculine superordinancy in a terrain that in many ways strongly corresponds to Homi K. Bhabha's theory of liminal space. Viewed as such, the borderless and nationless American Southwest presents Núñez with a spatial threshold between the settled territories of Florida and present day Mexico. In this section, I argue that the liminality of the Southwest allows Núñez the spatial component necessary in order to create an exemplary masculine code that capitalizes on his seemingly subordinate position among subjects whose gender dynamics starkly contrast those of Núñez himself. By privileging a heteronormative Messianic masculine code in opposition to New World gender dynamics, Núñez cleverly consolidates power to his favor. Rather than operate exclusively as a site of cultural negotiation, then, the liminal American Southwest functions instead as a site that offers Núñez creative license to problematize the natives' claims to power, at the same time that it permits him to reappropriate masculine agency.

Occurring within the interstices of interacting cultures, liminal space, to use Bhabha's words, fosters "enunciative sites in which the limits and limitations of social power are encountered in an agonistic relation" (*Culture* 9). I build on this approach by arguing that this spatial outlook can also function, at least at the textual level, as a mechanism that reinforces claims to power in favor of an already dominant cultural or epistemic platform. *Naufragios*, for example, treats the present-day American Southwest as an in-between space, free from legislative oversight, that its author navigates while transforming his subordinate position into one that is dominant and highly revered through feminine work and Messianic feats.

We have previously witnessed how Núñez carefully counters his leader's authority in the opening chapters while later underscoring his own suffering at the hands of the natives whom he labels "recio" and "sin razón" (121). Rather than resort to violence as a means to masculine dominance, Núñez invokes feigned humility and vivid accounts of bodily suffering that ultimately allow him to alter local power through a highly nuanced masculine performance. An assessment of the text's liminal space allows readers to understand how the American Southwest corroborates the most vivid moments of Núñez's Messianic masculine guise. If Núñez is careful to avoid the masculine performances of previous Spanish explorers, he is equally careful to affirm violence as an inveterate feature of Native American culture that he must oppose and overcome.

In chapter XVI, Núñez recounts his six years of experience on the island of Mal Hado while carefully profiling violence as normative among many of the native tribes (133).²⁵ An equally important component in this chapter, though, centers upon Núñez's newly acquired position as "un mercader"—a post that not only encourages the local natives to treat him well, but also allows him to more freely navigate the local territory. Understood as a liminal, 'in-between' space, the island of Mal Hado allows Núñez to navigate both the terrain as well as different identity categories. No longer subordinate, Núñez utilizes his newfound agency as a means to further attract attention to himself among his Native American peers, affirming that "les traía lo que habían menester, y los que no me conocían me procuraban y deseaban ver por mi fama" (134). Such popularity, we notice, directly corresponds to both his

²⁵ In his article "Pauline Typology in Cabeza de Vaca's *Naufragios*," Kun Jong Lee relates Núñez's experiences on the island of Mal Hado to those of the shipwrecked St. Paul and his followers on Melita (243). The author elaborates that Núñez's "reenactment of Paul's preservation from a shipwreck on the apostle's way to Rome is an indirect way to suggest that his similar deliverance from the shipwreck stems also from God's overarching plan to send the latter-day Paul to the American Gentiles" (233-34).

movement westward as well as his reworking of local power in opposition to deeply rooted violence.

The opposition to violence grows increasingly more nuanced as the account progresses. In chapter XVIII, Núñez details the cruelty of local native tribes toward his Spanish compatriots, at the same time that he also posits violence as symptomatic of the local natives' culture, even within the domestic sphere:

Esto hacen éstos por una costumbre que tienen, y es que matan sus mismos hijos por sueños, y a las hijas en naciendo las dejan comer a perros ... La razón por que ellos lo hacen es, según ellos dicen, porque todos los de la tierra son sus enemigos y con ellos tienen continua guerra; y que si acaso casasen sus hijas, multiplicarían tanto sus enemigos, que los sujetarían y tomarían por esclavos. (143)

By profiling violence within the native tribes as ubiquitous and normative, Núñez further entrenches a binary that allows him to affirm his own superiority from a subject position that defies the norms of local masculine codes. Far from serving as a simple description of Native American culture, the foregoing passage provides Núñez with a convenient means to further integrate Messianic tropes alongside his vision of a new dominant masculine script. The edifying commentary with regards to Native American women that directly follows this passage only corroborates this outlook by advancing a binary whereby women—and not men—perform the strenuous duties that, in Núñez's view, maintain the community's livelihood.²⁶

Countering the women's work ethic with the laziness and drunkenness of their male counterparts, Núñez writes, "[N]o se cargan los hombres ni llevan cosa de peso; mas llévanlo las mujeres y los viejos, que es la gente que ellos menos tienen" (144). Núñez then elaborates this gendered dichotomy by arguing, "Las mujeres son muy trabajadas y para mucho, porque de veinticuatro horas que hay entre día y noche, no tienen sino seis horas de descanso, y todo lo más de la noche pasan en atizar sus hornos" (145). Sandra Slater correctly argues that Núñez's representation of women

²⁶ Diana de Armas Wilson also notes the fluidity of Núñez's gender performance. In her reading of *Naufragios*, de Armas Wilson proposes that while Núñez "is never prepared to recognize ... gender displacement," he nonetheless "*becomes a woman* in the sense that he often inhabits a female subject position" (23, author's emphasis). Though de Armas Wilson does not discuss masculinity construction and spatial liminality, she underscores how religious loyalties instead of gender strictures "provide the sites of Cabeza de Vaca's subject formation" (27). As I have attempted to demonstrate, however, it is neither exclusively religious affiliation nor gender that shapes Núñez's textual persona, but rather both. Messianic performance emerges from, and reinforces, a new masculine script that Núñez constructs within the liminal desert region in order to advance his claims to authority.

as fortuitous undermines the masculinity of the Native American men (“Nought but women” 39). I add, however, that these representations also permit Núñez to advance his masculine superiority in opposition to the other men present. In addition to representing the Native American men as indolent, Núñez also profiles them as “grandes ladrones” and “grandes borrachos” who “[m]ienten muy mucho” (145).²⁷ To argue that this passage seeks to merely exalt women in light of an overarching masculine warrior culture overlooks the immediate benefit that this commentary affords to Núñez himself. Núñez, we note, vilifies the native men only after having praised the tireless and ever subordinate women, and that by doing so, he cleverly dignifies the seemingly subordinate position that he himself occupies as a marginal figure and menial worker.²⁸ Núñez consistently crafts passivity and nonviolence to his advantage, as Gómez-Galisteo has argued, by positing Native American men as other(ed) antagonists prone to violence.²⁹

We have previously signaled the inherent mimetic and performative nature of masculine codes as well as how Núñez affirms his own masculine superiority in opposition to his Native American counterparts. A crucial moment in the account occurs in chapter XXII when Núñez and his companion Castillo cure the natives of their ailments. Similar to his defiance of the Narváez hierarchy, Núñez here counters Castillo in order to stress his own superiority.³⁰ Affirming that “por toda la tierra no se hablase sino de los misterios que Dios nuestro Señor con nosotros obraba,” Núñez signals that Castillo “creía que sus pecados habían de estorbar que no todas veces sucediese bien el curar” (157). If Castillo’s sins are too heavy and too many, Núñez assures us that it is he who is able to compensate for his compatriot’s moral and masculine deficits: “[I]os indios me dijeron que yo fuese a curarlos, porque ellos

²⁷ In her article concerning New World gender dynamics, M^a del Carmen Gómez-Galisteo contends that Núñez’s contestation of typical male activities among the natives, “such as warring or hunting,” allowed him to assume the subject position of a woman (“Subverting Gender Roles” 18).

²⁸ Arguing that European societies at the time “used gender and honor systems to structure social relations between and among men and women,” (11) historian Juliana Barr contends that Núñez’s time among the natives forced him to “put an ennobling spin on his experiences,” but that, in the end, his encounters with Native American norms created the potential for a “loss of male honor” (*Peace Came* 4).

²⁹ In her article “Representing Native American Women in Early Colonial American Writings,” M^a del Carmen Gómez-Galisteo affirms, “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” (28). As such, their writings, she argues, bring to light “the I (or we) versus the Other(s) [whereby] Native Americans came to represent the ubiquitous Other against whom Europeans described and defined themselves” (25).

³⁰ In this regard, I concur with Kun Jong Lee’s analysis regarding the strategies that undergird Núñez’ miracle-working. Specifically, Jong Lee argues that Núñez’s healing practices delineate “his rise as the supreme medicine man,” and that such practices are designed “to differentiate himself from his fellow survivors” (“Pauline Typology” 244).

me querían bien y se acordaban que les había curado” (157). In addition to affirming the mimetic nature of masculine codes, this passage also underscores the exclusionary practices attendant to gender hierarchies. How, though, do the mechanisms of exclusion and hierarchy intersect with New World gender norms? While the question is complex and multifaceted, I will conclude by briefly examining how the “third gender” of the Native American *berdaches* contrasts the heteronormative framework within which Núñez constructs a Messianic masculine code.

In chapter XXVI, Núñez recalls in particularly vivid language his perception of the Native American *berdaches*. Affirming the errancy of sexual practices that he terms “una diablura” (173), Núñez criticizes the group’s defiance of Spanish heteronormativity accordingly: “[V]i un hombre casado con otro, y estos son unos hombres amarionados, impotentes, y andan tapados como mujeres y hacen oficio de mujeres ... y son más membrunos que los otros hombres” (173). The descriptions of the *berdaches’* sexual practices reflect the observations of Juliana Barr, who, in her book concerning Native American gender and feminine agency in the Southwest, proposes, “Masculinity and femininity were not fixed or static categories but were defined and produced by the interactions and relationships between men and women, among men, and among women” (*Peace Came* 10). It comes as little surprise, then, that the adjectives Núñez employs represent the *berdache* men as defective for their contestation of heteronormative gender performance.³¹ Núñez cleverly privileges the seemingly subordinate subject position he himself occupies among the natives through a double disparagement: on the one hand, he vilifies as lazy and violent the Native American men who exhibit heteronormative sexuality, while on the other, he demonizes the *berdaches* for their New World “third gender” code.

The reader must recall that if both heterosexual men as well as their *berdache* counterparts serve as objects of disdain in *Naufragios*, it is precisely because Núñez must invert feminine duties—responsibilities he himself assumes—as the modes of comportment that, within liminal space, afford him both masculine agency and a

³¹ Writing with regards to the *berdaches*, Gómez-Galisteo remarks that “Native Americans did not see the role of *berdaches* as threatening to the status quo” (“Subverting Gender Roles” 19). Instead, the *berdaches*, “helped confirm hierarchical relationships and were highly regarded. Though Europeans saw (and described) them as feminized men, for Native Americans they were two-spirit, that is, a third gender moving between the boundaries of man and spirits and also the boundaries of gender” (19). It is also helpful to note, as Sarah Slater has made obvious, that Hernán Cortés, like Núñez, also shared a similar, if not exact, view regarding New World gender codes that defied Spanish heteronormativity (“Nought but Women” 47).

position of power. As such, the valorization of Native American women converges with the Messianic persona that Núñez creates for himself so as to ultimately affirm a superordinate position of male power from one that is seemingly subordinate and feminine. The fact that Núñez performs miracles in lieu of engaging in acts of war or other violent behaviors further entrenches his gender performance within a Messianic paradigm of non-violence, passivity, and exemplarity. Núñez's comments in chapter XXXI underscore his newfound authority as part and parcel of his Messianic exemplarity: "Toda esta gente," argues Núñez, "venía a nosotros a que los tocásemos y santiguásemos ... y entre todas estas gentes se tenía por muy cierto que veníamos del cielo" (194-5). If Núñez cannot perform under the mimetic guise of his most revered Spanish male idols, he must instead draw recourse to transcendental figures (the Christian Messiah), metaphysical undertakings (miracle-working, healing), as well as oft-lauded virtues (humility and poverty). Núñez consistently utilizes a seemingly subordinate position and its correlating discursive tropes so as to underhandedly advance a superordinate position of masculine power. By all accounts, the creative endeavor worked. Núñez wrote his account in late 1537. In 1540, Charles V bestowed upon him governorship of the province of Río de la Plata in what is now Paraguay.

A critical examination of *Naufragios* regarding masculine performance within the liminal, desert regions described therein sheds new light on the power dynamics at work as well as how they converge with the dominant ideological framework within which our author conceived the account. Rather than affirm masculinity as monolithic, this reading of *Naufragios* stresses the homosocial, place-based, and historically contingent nature of masculine codes. Throughout the account, Núñez navigates a region that affords little security. Food scarcity, language barriers, and the supposed normative violence of the Native American men all entail numerous challenges that Núñez must overcome. By calling attention to the confluence of power, liminal space, and masculinity construction, this project underscores how Núñez increments his own authority among and against both his Spanish and Native American counterparts by advancing Messianic masculine exemplarity in a liminal region that affords such creative license. By examining the text's discursive tropes, its emphasis on the male body, as well as the spatial dynamics chronicled throughout, readers are able to glean a more nuanced insight into *Naufragios* by interrogating the construction of the miracle-working Núñez described therein.

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