

“THE PEOPLE WE FOUND THERE ARE TALL AND WELL-BUILT”: VISIONS OF NATIVE AMERICANS BY A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SPANISH CONQUISTADOR

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Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, grandson of a conquistador, surely wanted to emulate his forbearer's success when he was appointed treasurer to the Pánfilo de Narváez's expedition to Florida in 1527. Much as he wanted to be a conquistador, however, the failure of the expedition prevented him from fulfilling his aspirations. Instead, he became a captive to the Native Americans, totally dependent upon their protection to survive. Fulfilling a number of roles as slave, merchant, physician, and almost a god to the Native Americans, he soon abandoned his prejudices about Native Americans and got a first-hand experience. With this, he grasped a better understanding of American reality and the manners of the Native Americans that he was able to transmit to others in his Account. From being a man who knew nothing of either America or its inhabitants prior to his taking part in this expedition, he became the best source for subsequent authors and expeditions to the area. Also, different from other analyses of Cabeza de Vaca's treatment of Native Americans that are limited to his experiences in Florida, this essay also explores Cabeza de Vaca's attitude towards Native Americans as governor of Argentina later on.

When, in 1527, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca embarked on Pánfilo de Narváez's expedition to conquer Florida, little could he have imagine the adventures awaiting for him there. Neither could he have predicted the length of a journey designed to be a re-edition of the success Cortés had previously had in New Spain. Cabeza de Vaca, whose paternal grandfather was Pedro de Vera, the conqueror of the Canary Islands, surely expected to emulate his forebear's success in the American continent. He was, more than anything else, a *conquistador*, and if he did not have the chance to act as one, it was not out of willingness but forced by the circumstances.¹

The failure of the expedition made it so that, unable to fulfill any other role,

I can render only this service: to bring Your Majesty an account of what I learned and saw in the ten years that I wandered lost and naked through many and very strange lands, noting the location of lands and provinces and the distances between them as well as the sustenance and animals produced in each, and the diverse customs of the many and very barbarous peoples with whom I came into contact and lived, and all the other particulars which I could observe and know, so Your Majesty should be served in some way by this.²

Consequently, Cabeza de Vaca's *Account* (first published in Zamora, 1542; reprinted in Valladolid in 1555), recounting his decade-long experiences in the Americas, moves away from its official responsibility

¹ Juan Francisco Maura, ed., *Naufragios*, 2nd ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1996), 55.

² Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account: Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's Relación*, ed., Martin A. Favata and José B. Fernández (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), 28.

of recording the expedition's deeds towards expressing the uncertainty of the journey; combining geographical details as well as the description of the anxiety and calamities of Narváez's men.³

To report to the king and to inform those who had not been and never would be to America, Cabeza de Vaca devoted a great part of his narrative to the description of the Native Americans among whom he would live for almost a decade. This essay analyzes the progression of the changing views of Cabeza de Vaca toward the Native Americans he encountered. Moving from the perspective of a conquistador-to-be to the first-hand experience of somebody who was successively an inferior, an equal, and in the last instance a near god to the Native Americans, we see the evolution of the thought and sensibility of a prototypical sixteenth-century Spaniard. Thanks to Cabeza de Vaca's testimony we can better grasp period views on native inhabitants of America.

THE EXPEDITION

Pánfilo de Narváez, the *Adelantado* of the expedition, was no beginner when it came to the American enterprise—he had actively participated in the conquest of Cuba (1511-1514) and had been second in command to Velázquez, New Spain's ruler. Therefore, Cortés's rebellion had posed a threat not only to Velázquez's (and by extension, Narváez's) control over New Spain but also to his up to then glorious military career. To stop Cortés' advance, Velázquez sent Narváez in charge of an army that greatly outnumbered Cortés' men. After landing in Veracruz, Narváez's men fought Cortés, and were defeated on May 24, 1520, at the battle of Cempoala. Narváez, who lost an eye in the the battle, was arrested and kept in Cortés' custody for several months.

Despite the public humiliation of Cortés' defeat of his far larger army, Narváez did not fall out of royal favor. Once back in Spain Narváez became a bitter man who tried to discredit Cortés and even worked to build a case for the rebels execution, as reported by Cortés' official chronicler, Francisco López de Gómara in his *Historia de la conquista de México*. Notwithstanding his recent failure, Narváez succeeded in securing a ban of Cortés' letters (the printing of them and those already in circulation), which reported his defeat. At the same time that he worked to destroy the credibility of the man who had publicly humiliated him, Narváez asked the emperor for a petition for Florida. Originally just a trading petition, in his second petition Narváez requested permission to "conquer, populate, and discover everything that there is to discover in those parts."⁴ That he still kept enough support at court so as to be assigned to the task of colonizing Florida proves that, contrary to some claims, Narváez was not a fallen man. On the contrary, Narváez retained the Spanish king's favor throughout his life.⁵ Yet, the expedition to Florida that would turn out to be his last seemed a decisive opportunity to regain his past military glory, somewhat stained after Cortés' defeated him seven years earlier. Narváez had to prove he was the military glory of the old days to himself, to the king and the court and, most importantly he felt, to his own men.

There is no question that Narváez's authority was being questioned by his own men. Even Cabeza de Vaca, who had no direct experience when it came to America, felt entitled to point out the failed

³ Pupo-Walker quoted in M^a José Borrero Barrera, "Las Crónicas de indias como documento informativo: Los Naufragios de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca," *Revista electrónica de estudios filológicos* no. 7 (2004); available from: <http://www.um.es/tonosdigital/znum7/estudios/bfuncion.htm>; Internet; accessed 23 October 2006.

⁴ Adorno and Pautz, *Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, vol. 2, 11.

⁵ Frank Goodwyn, "Pánfilo de Narváez, A Character Study of the First Spanish Leader to Land an Expedition to Texas," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 29, no. 1 (1949): 152-155.

conquistador's mistakes. We can only wonder whether Cabeza de Vaca would have dared question Narváez's decisions so readily had Narváez not been a man so profoundly humiliated in the battlefield.⁶ In light of Narváez's apparent stubbornness, which eventually caused his own death and that of the vast majority of the members of the expedition, it is clear that his judgment in the Florida expedition was unsound. Yet, he had been assigned to a leadership position as first in command on the expedition and had a vast amount of experience in the Americas and with military strategy. No matter the negative light that Cabeza de Vaca tried to shine on Narváez, he was a man skilled in a number of American campaigns who had played a most important role in the conquest of New Spain but whose fame and reputation had recently been obscured by Cortés's much more charismatic and impressive historical figure.⁷

Ill-fated is the adjective most writers use to describe the Narváez's expedition and, certainly, ill-fated it was.⁸ Narváez's expedition sailed from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Cádiz on June, 17 1527 but, forced to make several stops in Santo Domingo and Cuba, it would not reach the American coast until the following year. As if to foreshadow the failure that awaited them, prior to their landing in America the expedition faced a number of difficulties, including the devastating loss of two ships in a storm and the desertion of almost a quarter of their men in Santo Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic). Once in America, having landed in an unknown place their pilot, Miruelo, was unable to identify. The party was completely at a loss about their location. Thinking they were somewhere between Pánuco or Río de las Palmas, Narváez made the decision to send the ships ahead of the terrestrial party.⁹ This, along with his decision to go further inland in the hopes of reaching the province of Apalache, reported to contain gold, led to the ultimate loss of the terrestrial expedition. Attempting to escape that "awful country,"¹⁰ the landing party built some rudimentary barges, whose eventual shipwreck left them vulnerable and led to their eventual pressing into slavery amongst a Native group.

Having lost the barges and all their possessions along with their last hopes of escaping by their own means, the situation of Cabeza de Vaca and the men on his barge were desperate. Almost starving

⁶ Another factor contributing to the strained relationship between Cabeza de Vaca and Narváez which, in my opinion, is often overlooked when discussing their enmity is that Cabeza de Vaca was a royal appointee sent to check on Narváez. In the words of Bruce-Novoa, Cabeza de Vaca "emprendió su carrera de conquistador bajo la señal de la ambigüedad: viajaba al mando de Narvaez, pero como oficial del emperador fiel al poder central. Representaba intereses ajenos a Narvaez" [began his career as a conquistador marked by ambiguity—he travelled under Narváez's command but also as an imperial officer loyal to the central power. He represented interests other than Narváez's; translation mine]. Juan Bruce-Novoa, "Naufragios en los mares de la significación: de *La Relación* de Cabeza de Vaca a la literatura chicana," in *Notas y comentarios sobre Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, ed. Margo Glantz (México D.F.: Grijalbo, 1993), 294.

⁷ Unfortunately for Narváez, there is no official chronicle of his deeds in America that could have redeemed him in public opinion. The main historical accounts that deal with his American activities are López de Gómara's *Historia* (which, being Cortés's official chronicle, aggrandizes the figure of Narváez's rival), Las Casas's works (in which the Dominican friar denounced Narváez's cruelty to the Native Americans) and Cabeza de Vaca's account.

⁸ Actually, ever since Juan Ponce de León's appointment as Adelantado to Florida in 1512, most expeditions to Florida had been a failure. Margo Glantz, ed., *Notas y comentarios sobre Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca* (México D.F.: Grijalbo, 1993), 407.

⁹ The pilots reckoned that Pánuco was 10-15 miles and Río de las Palmas was more or less at the same distance, when in fact they were over 600 and 900 miles away, respectively. Cyclone Covey, *Cabeza de Vaca's Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America* [book on-line] (The Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., 1961, accessed 20 June 2006); available from: [http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/Cabeza de Vaca/rel.htm](http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/Cabeza%20de%20Vaca/rel.htm); Internet. Krieger, *We Came Naked and Barefoot*, 25.

¹⁰ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 46.

and with a scarce knowledge of the American environment, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were forced to rely on Native American hospitality, despite their suspicions of human sacrifices:

I told the Christians that, if they agreed, I would ask those Indians to take us to their lodges. And some who had been to New Spain responded that we should not even think about it, because if they took us to their lodges they would sacrifice us to their idols. But seeing that we had no other recourse and that any other action would certainly bring us closer to death, I did not pay attention to what they were saying and I asked the Indians to take us to their lodges.¹¹

This rendered them impotent in Native Americans' hands and they became slaves.

Eventually separated from the other fourteen surviving Spaniards and desperately ill, Cabeza de Vaca lived among the Capoques, suffering a number of abuses until he became a merchant (a female role in Capoques society according to historians¹²), which led to better treatment and a freedom to go and come as he wished. As Cabeza de Vaca would later proclaim, his move to merchant status meant he "was not a slave."¹³ After six and a half years there, including a frustrated escape plan that ended up in another harsh period as a slave, this time at the hands of different Native American group, Cabeza de Vaca eventually managed to flee with three companions, Andrés Dorantes, Alonso del Castillo, and Estevanico, a black, Moorish slave. They began a long march throughout the southwest of the US, meeting a number of Native American groups, until they came upon the Spanish Captain Diego de Alcaraz who saw that they were sent to New Spain. Along the way, their curing abilities (which Cabeza de Vaca interpreted as a sign of God's favor) made of them almost gods in Native American eyes, receiving the name of "sons of the Sun"—"the robbers told them that we were children of the sun, that we had the power to heal the sick or to kill them, and many lies bigger than these."¹⁴

CABEZA DE VACA'S PERCEPTION OF THE NATIVE AMERICANS

Moving from understanding the America through prejudiced, second-hand opinions, Cabeza de Vaca came to appreciate the importance of direct, first-hand experience. Living among several Native American groups and fulfilling a number of completely different roles (slave, merchant, physician/shaman, god-like figure to the Native Americans), Cabeza de Vaca's experience with the Native Americans was multi-faceted and complex. Because of his wide range of roles, *Naufragios* is a more complete account on Native Americans' manners, customs, traditions, lifestyle than others from the period. John Smith's account of the America's dealt with the Powhatan primarily, William Bradford's relationship with Native Americans (other than Squanto's group) was scarce and derived from relatively shallow contact). Even Juan Ortiz, another member of the Narváez expedition found by the Hernando de Soto expedition twelve years later,

¹¹ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 56, 57. Lagmanovich points out that Native Americans, as a whole, are modelled after the description of Mexican natives. David Lagmanovich, "Los Naufragios de Álvar Núñez como construcción narrativa," in *Crítica y descolonización: El sujeto colonial en la cultura latinoamericana*, ed. Beatriz González Stephan and Lúcia Helena Costigan (Caracas: Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela, 1992), 43-44.

¹² Mariah Wade, "Go-between: The Roles of Native American Women and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in Southern Texas in the Sixteenth Century," *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999).

¹³ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 65.

¹⁴ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 95.

although having lived for a decade among the Native Americans, had lived with just one Native American group. Cabeza de Vaca, however, came into contact with a diverse number of groups during his travel and movement throughout what is now the U.S. Southwest.

From being a castaway Cabeza de Vaca became an “expert” on the culture and land of the regions he moved through. And the pages of his account expressed a new awareness to the American and, particularly Native American, reality. Because of the chronological order Cabeza de Vaca imposed on his account, we can see this evolution of Cabeza de Vaca’s opinion of the Native Americans as a gradual adaptation as he Cabeza learned how to cope, survive and flourish in amongst the new climate, fauna, flora, and population. In the same way that Cabeza de Vaca learned what plants and the animals would feed him, he was forced to learn about the customs of the Native Americans., It was this adaptation to the socio-political and kinship systems of the groups he traveled through and interacted with that ultimately ensured Cabeza de Vaca’s survival.¹⁵

The first encounter of Cabeza de Vaca with the American native population had been an extremely negative one. The Native Americans he saw for the first time in his lifetime were hostile and attacked he and his men.¹⁶ However, following this attack, they found other Native’s that seemed willing to show them where they could find corn.¹⁷ What might be attributed to either a sudden change of opinion on the part of Cabeza de Vaca (are the Native Americans hostile or, on the contrary, friendly and hospitable?) or a sudden change of mind on the part of the Native Americans (are they trying to expel the Spaniards from their lands or do they really want to help them survive and stay and live in their lands along with them?) is one of the most striking characteristics throughout the whole work. Within his accounts, a negative assessment of one group of Native Americans is generally counterbalanced by a positive one within the space of a couple of pages, and sometimes in the very same one. Perhaps stemming from a lack of understanding, perhaps the result of unwittingly participating in various customs, one portion of Cabeza de Vaca’s account explains how an encounter with one group was initiated with the offering water to the thirsty Spaniards, but was followed immediately by the taking of two of his companions as captives. Earlier in his account he praises the “good” Native Americans he finds when a group arrive “as promised, bringing us much fish, some roots which they eat, the size of walnuts” and later returning “to bring us more fish and the same kind of roots.”¹⁸ Only a page later Cabeza de Vaca admits that, despite the apparent gestures of good will he remained afraid that the group would return to sacrifice them.¹⁹

However, even in his most negative descriptions of Native Americans, the modern reader might easily overlook that, no matter how dreadful the assessments of Native Americans are, they are still treated as human. Given the lack of contact between the “New” and “Old” world in this period, expectations of the nature, character, and even the shape, of Native American’s were drastically exaggerated. Christopher

¹⁵ Beatriz Pastor, “Silencio y escritura: la historia de la Conquista,” in *Crítica y descolonización: El sujeto colonial en la cultura latinoamericana*, eds. Beatriz González Stephan and Lúcia Helena Costigan (Caracas: Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela, 1992), 151, 147.

¹⁶ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 34.

¹⁷ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 35.

¹⁸ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 56.

¹⁹ Other examples are the following—his problems with the Native Americans (chapter 8) are contrasted with the Native Americans’ hospitality (chapter 9), and his complaints about the Native Americans (chapter 9) are followed by his assertion of his trust on them (chapter 17).

Columbus expressed his surprise, when arriving in America, that there were not monster-men in America. Writing just a few years later, Cabeza de Vaca spoke of cruel men, but despite his perception of aggressiveness and various "defects," Cabeza de Vaca's Native Americans are far from being monsters and are rather portrayed as the proto-typical "noble savage."²⁰ Cabeza de Vaca's account even took issue with the common assumption that cannibalism was a common practice revealing that the only cannibals were the Spaniards,²¹ whose desperate situation, starving and lost, forced them into cannibalism, much to the shocked horror of surrounding Native groups.

As can be expected, Cabeza de Vaca's account is full of contradictions, since his very experience with the Native Americans was full of contradictions as well. It is indeed very reasonable that the man who was both a slave and who internalized the label of "a god", for his healing capacities, could offer such differing views of the Native Americans as "very lazy and mean"²² on the one hand, while praising them on other occasions as "gente a maravilla bien dispuesta."²³ Though he was a European pioneer in many aspects, not only geographically but also in his apparent defense of the Native Americans, Cabeza de Vaca still was a man of his times, sharing the view of an innocent, idyllic, paradise-like New World as much as the Aristotelian notion of a place full of barbarity and vices.²⁴ The Native Americans, accordingly, are central to his ambivalent account.

It is important to note that while Cabeza de Vaca's account, reflects his changing views on the Native Americans it also contains the hints of Native Americans' views on Cabeza de Vaca himself. From being slaves Cabeza de Vaca and his companions came to be called gods, that were revered and treated accordingly. In gaining a mutual knowledge and understanding of one another, the relationship established between Native Americans and the Christian would-be-conquerors was a changing one. Their understanding of each other as other becomes reciprocal, then.

CABEZA DE VACA AND HIS IDEAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND NATIVE AMERICANS

Upon first arriving in America, Cabeza de Vaca did not seem too squeamish about Native American well being and rights—"he appeared to be no more upset about how the Native Americans were treated than were his companions and showed no more regret about ignoring their 'liberties'."²⁵ Actually,

²⁰ Actually, Cabeza de Vaca's physical description of the Native Americans is a praising one—"since they are all so tall and they are naked, from a distance they look like giants. They are quite handsome, very lean, very strong and light-footed," or "the people we found there are tall and well-built." Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 44, 59.

²¹ In chapter 17, Cabeza de Vaca explains how, after the shipwreck of the barges, the group going in one of them, lost and separated from the other survivors, ate the dead and in chapter 14, he reports that five Christians "became so desperate that they ate one another one by one until there was only one left, who survived because the others were not there to eat him." Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 59.

²² Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 66.

²³ Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Naufrajios* (n.p.: El Aleph, 2000), 23. I quote this time from a Spanish-language edition and not from Favata and Fernández's translation, because their translation of this expression ("they are quite handsome") has nothing to do with the original meaning intended by Cabeza de Vaca, which is rather "they are most well-disposed."

²⁴ Cristián García-Godoy, "La travesía de Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca," *Gaceta Iberoamericana* XI, no. 5 (1999-2000). Available from: <http://gacetaiberoamericana.com/Issues/VolXINr5/lit3.html>; Internet; accessed 25 September 2006.

²⁵ David A. Howard, *Conquistador in Chains: Cabeza de Vaca and the Native Americans of the Americas* (Tuscaloosa, AL & London: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 6.

Fernández claims that Cabeza de Vaca witnessed abuse and ill-treatment of Native Americans on the part of Narváez or other members and the expeditions but altogether “forgot” to mention it in his account.²⁶ That notwithstanding, one of his official duties was to report on “how the natives are treated, our instructions observed, and other of the things respecting their liberties that we have commanded; especially the matters touching the service of our Lord and divine worship, the teachings of the Native Americans in the Holy Faith.”²⁷

However, after living with Native Americans for six years, Cabeza de Vaca had undergone a change of mind, coming to regard Native Americans as men. For the historian David Howard, a key factor in Cabeza de Vaca’s understanding of the Native Americans’ humanness was religion—“as he beheld his need for God, he saw that same need among the Native Americans as well, opening his eyes to their shared humanity.”²⁸ Cabeza de Vaca, though certain that the Native Americans were pagan idolaters, still could find some similarities in their worshipping and his very own so as to convince the Native Americans that their god, Aguar, was in truth just another name for God²⁹:

Melchor Díaz told the interpreter to speak to those Indians on our behalf, telling them that we came on behalf of God, who is in heaven, and that we had gone through the world for many years telling all the people we met to believe in God and serve him, because he was the lord of everything in the world and would repay and reward good people and condemn bad people to eternal punishment with fire. ... and that in the case of those people who refused to believe him or obey his commandments, God would cast them under the earth in the company of demons, into a great fire that would never end and would torment them forever.³⁰

Once this parallelism was established and the superiority of the power of God over the power of the Native American divinities (as evidenced by the miracles Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were able to perform) was ascertained, Cabeza de Vaca found the Native Americans most willing to be Christianized. It is relevant noting here that for Cabeza de Vaca, the only effective way to Christianize and colonize the Native Americans (“to be attracted to becoming Christians and subjects of your Imperial Majesty”) was to see that they were “treated well; this is a very sure way to accomplish this; indeed, there is no other way.”³¹ In a historical moment when the Native Americans’ “failure” (or reluctance) to accept Christianity was considered *casus belli* for the conquistadors to launch full-fledged attacks, Cabeza de Vaca’s understanding is remarkable because it ran contrary to the common assumption that Native Americans’ rejection of the Spaniards’ religion deprived them of any right they might have had until becoming Christian. Cabeza de Vaca’s advocacy for a society where Christians and Native Americans could live happily and freely together is similar to Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo’s utopia of a fair

²⁶ José B Fernández, *Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: The Forgotten Chronicler* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1975), 121.

²⁷ Quoted in Howard, *Conquistador in Chains*, 4-6.

²⁸ Quoted in Howard, *Conquistador in Chains*, 17.

²⁹ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 113.

³⁰ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 113.

³¹ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 106.

society that was sensibly ruled by Christian ideals.³² Indians were men, but their status made them simply a passing point in a larger progression towards becoming more fully civilized.

As such, Cabeza de Vaca was not proposing an egalitarian society. The idea that Cabeza de Vaca had of Christians and Native Americans capacity for co-existence was, undoubtedly, a much more humane conception of the New World and of its inhabitants than that which Narváez or previous conquistadors had entertained. But he still advocated for a society in which Native Americans would be subject to Spanish and Christian rule. Cabeza de Vaca envisioned a society in which Native Americans were to become Christians, obeying the Emperor's orders and living among the Christians, who would treat them well, as true brothers, as long as they did as they were told: "if they wanted to be Christians and serve God the way we told them to, the Christians would consider them brothers and treat them very well."³³ If they refused to accept Christianization as well as colonization the Christians would be their enemies and enslave them with no remorse, Cabeza de Vaca warned.³⁴

The question of whether to convert Native Americans through persuasion or force, was one of the most heated controversies throughout the Spanish colonization of America. Therefore, it is not strange that Cabeza de Vaca, while trying to gently persuade the Native Americans to become Christians, also explained to them the dreary effects their refusal to accept Christianity would have. The Instructions that the Narváez expedition were given, written by Francisco de los Cobos in 1517, explained to the Native Americans the consequences of their not accepting their conversion to Christianity:

as best you can, I entreat and require you to understand this well which I have told you, taking the time for it that is just you should, to comprehend and reflect, and that you recognise the Church as Mistress and Superior of the universe and the High Pontiff. ... their Majesties, and I, in their royal name, will receive you with love and charity ... you shall not be required to become Christians, except when, informed of the truth, you desire to be converted to a Holy Catholic Faith, as nearly all the inhabitants of the other islands have done, and when His Highness will confer on you numerous privileges and instruction, with many favors. If you do not this, and of malice you be dilatory, I protest you, that, with the help of Our Lord, I will enter with force making war upon you from all directions and in every manner that I may be able, when I will subject you to obedience to the Church and the yoke of their Majesties; and I will take these persons of yourselves, your wives and your children to make slaves, sell and dispose of you, as Their Majesties shall thus fit; and I will take your goods, doing you all the evil and injury that I may be able, as to vassals who do not obey but reject their master, resist and deny him: and I declare to you that the deaths and damages that rise therefrom, will be your fault and not that of His Majesty, nor mine, nor of these cavaliers who come with me.

³² Curiously enough, for the location of this ideal society he had in mind, Fernández de Oviedo made use of the experiences in America of Alonso de Zuazo, who also shipwrecked in 1524 and whose story was reported by Fernández de Oviedo in *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535). Álvaro Félix Bolaños, "El subtexto utópico en un relato de naufragio del cronista Fernández de Oviedo," in *Crítica y descolonización: El sujeto colonial en la cultura latinoamericana*, ed. Beatriz González Stephan and Lúcia Helena Costigan (Caracas: Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela, 1992), 112.

³³ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 113.

³⁴ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 113.

Sixteenth-century Spain, contrary to twenty-first-century images of a harmonious three-culture society, was actually a society stratified along multiple layers in which different social groups lived peacefully but rarely co-existed together in the same space. It was a society in which slavery (of both African and Native American slaves) existed and ultimately Jews and Muslims were forced to either convert to Catholicism or be expelled from the whole Spanish empire, not just the peninsula. If, even in the desperate condition of Cabeza de Vaca and his companions as wanderers, distinctions were made between them and Estevanico, it would be naïve to think that Cabeza de Vaca would have been able to see the Native Americans as full equals to the Spaniards.³⁵ But that does not mean that he lacked a more nuanced vision of difference and Native Americans as Others.

CABEZA DE VACA AS GOVERNOR OF RÍO DE LA PLATA

One would think that, because of the hardships that he had undergone in America, Cabeza de Vaca would have chosen to spend the rest of his life as far from America as possible, away from the continent where he had undergone so many calamities and trials. However, soon after his arrival in Spain, Cabeza de Vaca sought out (and failed to obtain) the title of *Adelantado* of an imminent expedition to Florida, which was given instead to Hernando de Soto, whom he had most probably met in Seville and shared his experiences in America with.³⁶

Cabeza de Vaca would eventually receive the appointment of governor of the Río de Plata province, in present-day Argentina. Accusations made against him about his ill treatment of Native Americans during his brief governorship (1542-1544) stand in stark contrast to his hope for that Spaniards and Native Americans could live in an ethnically mixed, harmonious society. By the time Cabeza de Vaca was sent to Río de la Plata as governor, the Spanish government expressed great concern about the ill-treatment of Native Americans, as revealed by the inclusion of an earlier royal *cédula* in this regard in the capitulations. Although this *cédula* had already been included in other capitulations, such as Narvaéz's and De Soto's, Cabeza de Vaca "agreed with the ideas in this cedula more than other conquistadors and tried to apply them in America."³⁷

That he eventually succeeded in putting these ideas into practice or not during his time as governor of Río de la Plata is an altogether different matter. During his term as governor, Cabeza de Vaca appeared to be very much concerned about protecting Native Americans' rights, which had been consistently violated for decades prior to his arrival, with the consent (and even encouragement) of preceding governors. Nevertheless, Cabeza de Vaca was conscious that his first priority was Spaniards' well-being. Following this directive, Cabeza de Vaca justified poor treatment during the famine in Puerto de los Reyes. During this period Cabeza de Vaca instructed his soldiers to go on an expedition to buy food from the local Arriancosies, instructing them that in case the natives did not comply, soldiers were to obtain the food by

³⁵ Social status may be blurred, but it has not entirely disappeared and Estevanico is not an equal to them—he is the one who has to go chase a Native American, as a dog would do with a prey: "we sent the black man after him." Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 76.

³⁶ That Cabeza de Vaca was not the leader of this new expedition did not prevent two of his cousins from taking part in it, much to Cabeza de Vaca's resentment.

³⁷ Quoted in Howard, *Conquistador in Chains*, 40.

the means of force.³⁸

Cabeza de Vaca's advocacy in Florida for what he saw as the ideal community, in which Native Americans ("my Indians"³⁹) and Spaniards could live peacefully together in a Christian Empire, reveals a greater understanding than most conquistadors. That he himself could not put his ideas into practice as governor of the Río de la Plata province testifies not to the hypocrisy of Cabeza de Vaca but to the fact that his ideas were ill fitted for a world where Spaniards refused to engage in manual labor (considered improper for a well-bred gentleman) such as farming and lacked the knowledge, and Native Americans were seen as brutes and property almost universally.

CONCLUSIONS

Deprived of the possibility of emulating Cortés, Cabeza de Vaca learned from and taught his contemporaries an important way of understanding American anthropology, geography, fauna, and flora. Because much of what Cabeza de Vaca reported had never before been seen by Europeans, Cabeza de Vaca became the *de facto* chronicler of "a world previously undescribed by any European."⁴⁰ Cabeza de Vaca was a pioneer not in the riches he brought or in the lands he annexed to the already powerful colonial Spanish empire but in providing a knowledge of invaluable worth about America that was highly mediated by his interaction with local populations. From his experience as wanderer among the Native Americans, Cabeza de Vaca learned a number of valuable lessons. Chief among these was the realization that the rule Spaniards were imposing on other areas in America and were willing to enforce in Florida (and in any other new Spanish possession) was not the best way to define the relationship between the Native Americans and the Spaniards. The ferocity of the Floridian Natives made it an unlikely one, though, as later on De Soto himself experienced. By acknowledging this and proposing a new model of civilization in which both groups lived together as friends sharing a common Christian God, Cabeza de Vaca promoted a more humane and encompassing model of conquest and colonization. That he failed as governor to implement such progressive ideas testifies to the difficulties in enforcing humane Indian policies in a period where Spanish society was itself drastically stratified and hierarchical.

Cabeza de Vaca's experience with the Native Americans made him an authority for other defenders of Native Americans, most especially Las Casas. "He was the only Spaniard to live among the coastal Native Americans of Texas and survive to write about them,"⁴¹ and for his contemporaries he fulfilled the role of teacher that he had already claimed for himself in his account: "I wanted to relate this, not only because all men wish to know the customs and habits of other people, but also to warn anyone who may encounter these people about their customs and cunning—very useful information in such cases."⁴² With

³⁸ Quoted in Howard, *Conquistador in Chains*, 128.

³⁹ Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 78.

⁴⁰ Adorno and Pautz, *Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, vol. 2, xvii.

⁴¹ Donald E. Chipman, "Cabeza de Vaca, Álvar Núñez," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, The Texas State Historical Society, 19 July 2001. Available from: <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/fca6.html>; Internet; accessed 28 September 2006.

⁴² Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 88.

this, his account might be seen more as an early travel guide, a *baedeker*⁴³ effectively replacing the original expedition goal of conquering and governing with a an account that appears more focused on informing and convincing others of the validity and uniqueness of Native culture.⁴⁴

43 Crovetto, Pier Luigi. "Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Naufragios* ," in *Crítica y descolonización: El sujeto colonial en la cultura latinoamericana*, ed. Beatriz González Stephan and Lúcia Helena Costigan (Caracas: Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela, 1992), 135.

44 Sylvia Molloy, "Alteridad y reconocimiento en los *Naufragios* de Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca," in *Crítica y descolonización: El sujeto colonial en la cultura latinoamericana*, ed. Beatriz González Stephan and Lúcia Helena Costigan (Caracas: Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela, 1992), 219.

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