

Cabeza de Vaca: A Model for Multiculturalism

By Stephen Petty

Artists and scholars who encounter Cabeza de Vaca's *Relacion* (1542, revised by him in 1555) are captivated by questions concerning transformation, the personal transformation of Cabeza de Vaca and the possible transformation between cultures in contact with each other for the first time (1).

As a text for a Humanities course, especially the accessible Cyclone Covey translation, *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America* (2), the *Relacion* invites an interdisciplinary approach, subverts the traditional Anglo-centered interpretation of American culture, and conveys a multicultural exchange in which the conqueror found himself in the inferior position (3). Cabeza de Vaca is the main literary source of peoples and cultures erased from the face of the earth. Ultimately the novelistic text introduces the multicultural theme that informs American writing to the present: the physical and emotional conflict between races and the healing discovery of the value of the other. The text is novelistic in that the subjective experience is allowed to enter an official report: this is an intimate tale of survival and salvation as it addresses the large themes that dominated the Old World-New World encounter. And it leaves the reader enriched with questions.

Recent interest in the *Relacion* has inspired musical compositions, poetry, a first-rate film, and new research, especially that funded by a Humanities grant to the University of Southwest Texas at San Marcos and The Witte Museum in San Antonio.

It is a tale of adventure, physical and spiritual. Of three hundred Spaniards, armored and with eighty horses, stranded in the Tampa Bay area on Florida's west coast, only Cabeza de Vaca and three companions, including a black Moorish slave from the west coast of Morocco, survived to rejoin their fellow Christians in Mexico eight years and 6,000 miles later. (4). The would-be conquerors of the 1528 Narvaez expedition were separated, killed, dead of disease and starvation, some engaging in cannibalism, and enslaved, their outer circumstance transformed.

Spanish armor was easily penetrated by arrows shot from six-foot-tall bows by natives "who loomed big and naked and from a distance looked like giants. They were handsomely proportioned, lean, agile, and strong. Their bows were thick as an arm, six or seven feet long, accurate at 200 paces," Cabeza de Vaca recounts the first major skirmish near the Apalachiola River, where he was wounded (Covey, 42). Eight years later the four survivors, the first Europeans to cross North America, are naked and unrecognizable to their co-religionists "dumbfounded at the sight of me, strangely undressed and in company with Indians. They just stood staring for a long time, not thinking to hail me or come closer to ask questions" (Covey, 125). Unlike other discoverer-adventurers, Cabeza de Vaca could not control the experience; his survival depended on accepting and exploiting the roles the natives placed on

him.

The Relacion is a report to Charles V by the second-in-command and treasurer of the failed Narvaez expedition that intended to be "strictly factual. Better than to exaggerate I have minimized all things"(Covey, 26). It is an account written to justify himself and bring attention to his usefulness as a servant of the state, for he hopes for reward and to lead another expedition to Florida, the one de Soto was to lead (5). The Relacion informs Charles V of the new peoples and land now under his control—or how to effectively exert authority and bring them into the Spanish Christian dominion. It is a political document that enters the main debate of the sixteenth century on how to define and treat the native population (6).

Did those strange inhabitants of the New World have the ability to reason and to accept Christianity? The answer to those questions would determine how the New World peoples would be placed within the European framework: as subhuman, naturally inferior because unable to reason and thus, according to Aristotle, deserving of enslavement—or as thinking beings with souls who were brothers to the Europeans? The main division was not one of race. Cabeza de Vaca throughout his account makes an ideological distinction, not a racial one: there were Christians and non-Christians. Were the natives capable of Christian faith? This is the sub-theme of the Relacion, one that served as a refrain to support Cabeza de Vaca's conclusion: "Clearly, to bring all these people to Christianity and subjection to Your Imperial Majesty, they must be won by kindness, the only certain way" Covey, 123). He assured Charles the V that the natives encountered during the journey were receptive, and practiced "no sacrifices and no idolatry" (133). The natives even believed in a god named Aguar: "They said they believed he created the whole world and everything in it" (Covey 131), an indication of a readiness for Christianity.

Appealing to Charles, Cabeza de Vaca concluded with the hope that "in the days of Your Majesty's dominion that these nations might all come voluntarily to Him who created and redeemed us" (Covey, 133). (The modern conquistador would term this "winning the hearts and minds of the people"). This gentle policy contrasts with the situation the four survivors found when they rejoined the Spanish: "We hastened through a vast territory, which we found vacant, the inhabitants having fled to the mountains in fear of Christians." The natives told how the Christians "had come through razing the towns and carrying off half the men and all the women and boys; those who had escaped were wandering around as fugitives" (Covey, 123).

In his account Cabeza de Vaca is naked and hidden at the same time. There is much between the lines and by implication, much left unsaid, not merely what sexual relations he may have engaged in, but most importantly what unmentioned native shaman practices he may have incorporated into his healing, practices that insured his survival and return. This last is the danger point. It is also the subject of discussion among present day scholars. It was at the spiritual level that the New and Old World cultures profoundly met. It is at this level that personal and cultural transformation most deeply occurred, and perhaps influences the present. A paper outlining the Southwest Texas Humanities grant, "History and Importance," suggests that "By combining Christian iconography with native belief systems, Cabeza de Vaca may have established a cultural tradition that

continues to have a major impact across the Southwest" (7). Cabeza de Vaca's Christianity encountered and addressed native Shamanism:

...the belief system of hunter-gathering people, seems to have crossed the Bering Strait with the first people, who told of a long time ago when all things, living or inanimate, human and animal, shared a cosmos and moved easily between the world of flesh and spirit. When this ability was lost, only a chosen few, the shamans, could make the perilous journey to the other world. In the spirit world, the shamans interceded with the supernatural forces for the well-being of the members of their communities (8).

Eliseo Torres of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, notes the similarity between Cabeza de Vaca's practice, power, and charismatic presence with that of that of famous modern Hispanic curanderos (faith healers) working in Mexico and the American Southwest: Pedrito Jaramillo (1829-1907), Teresita (1873-1906), and Nino Fidencio (1898-1938) (9). David Howard in *Conquistador in Chains* notes the de Soto expedition found wood crosses on dwellings in areas not visited by Cabeza de Vaca, the natives moved by legends of his kindness. Antonio de Espejo, leading a company in 1582 to explore what is now New Mexico, discovered Indians (the Jumanos) knew Christian practices and teaching, having been converted by Cabeza de Vaca (10)

The imagination is gripped by the physical adventure and by the "unknown interior" of Cabeza de Vaca as he brings his fundamentalist Christian faith to unknown peoples. Cabeza de Vaca the Catholic shared with the Puritans the same interpretation of the Bible: it was to be taken literally, and Christ had already endured hardship in more extreme forms. The devout interpreted their lives within their understanding of the Lord, acknowledging the Lord as the master of the unknown. They placed themselves in His hands. This is the refrain throughout the *Relacion*, repeated after each harrowing encounter: "Our most reliable help was God our Lord; we had not wavered in this conviction" (Covey, 44). Cabeza de Vaca and the shamans shared the belief that religion and faith played an important part in healing, that the divine power provided them with the gift to heal, that ritual based in faith healed the sick. All four of the Spanish castaways practiced faith healing and that is probably how they were able to survive. "It is fascinating to see how these Christian men were reduced to the use of Christian principles to guarantee their survival among the tribes of the Gulf coast," notes Charles W. Polzer, S.J. in "The Problem of Conquest" (11).

The more typical conquistador saw the native as a tool to be used, enslaved. The usual conquistador imposed a warlike Christianity as he organized society and rearranged nature for economic gain. He saw the natives with their unwholesome practices, including the acceptance of homosexuality (mentioned twice by Cabeza de Vaca), as the offspring of Satan. But how was Cabeza moved from this viewpoint, if he ever had it, in his eight-year journey, most of it dwelling with tribes along the Gulf coast from Florida to the San Antonio-Hill Country Texas, in the process learning six native languages? He was a deeply religious man before he was catapulted into this unexpected journey. He was a courageous, charismatic leader. But it was his compassion and power of close observation that seems to link him to the strange peoples of the New World. Perhaps it was the compassion the natives demonstrated for

the Spanish that ignited Cabeza de Vaca's compassion for the natives. One bitter November, after a wave capsized their raft as they tried to leave Galveston Island, "the survivors escaped as naked as they were born, with the loss of everything we had...with flowing tears, we prayed for mercy and pardon, each filled with pity not only for himself but for all his wretched fellows" (Covey, 57). Then a vista opens as he continues and describes the response of the natives [Capoques and Han] when they returned with food:

The Indians, understanding our full plight, sat down and lamented for half an hour so loudly that they could have been heard a long way off. It was amazing to see these wild, untaught savages howling like brutes in compassion for us. It intensified my own grief at our calamity and had the same effect on the other victims.

When the cries died down, I conferred with the Christians about asking the Indians to take us to their homes. Some of our number who had been to New Spain warned that the Indians would sacrifice us to their idols. But death being surer and nearer if we stayed where we were, I went ahead and beseeched the Indians. They were delighted. They told us to tarry a little while, then they would do as we wished (Covey, 57-58).

The Christians were to stay a lengthy time on Galveston Island, which he names due to his misfortune there as "Malhado" (evil fate or doom). He presents a people with strange customs often near starvation, not finding anything to eat for days, and yet a people who "love their offspring more than any in the world and treat them very mildly" (Covey, 61). And a people who are "generous to each other with what little they have" (Covey, 63). And oddly these people, a loose family group, have no chiefs.

His compassion informed Cabeza de Vaca's Christianity and the future success of his faith healing, and made him more open to cultures beyond his imagination. The "Malhado" experience seems to be a turning point. Prior to this Cabeza de Vaca joined the other conquistadors in emptying native villages of corn and whatever food they could find. His behavior changed after he escaped the island where he endured hard winters, illness, starvation, and overwork, pulling cane roots until his hands were bloody. During the long overland trek, begun by September or early October 1534, he was careful not to take food from the natives, and passed on what was given to him (12).

The needs of the natives suggested, and even imposed, roles that made possible his survival, and contributed to a deepening of his character, and possible transformation. The problem for Cabeza de Vaca was how to move between tribes, saving and taking with him what Christians he could, in the end only three compatriots. He began with his fellow adventurers as superior or equal to the natives, but with the decimation of the Christian force became a slave as did all the other Spaniards who were not killed, dead of starvation, drowning, or disease. Slaves were required to do woman's work: transport wood for fire, haul water, dig for roots in the cane swamps. "Their women toil incessantly" (Covey, 61). It was in this womanly role that he found a solution, that of mediator between warring tribes, mediation required for trade.

As Cabeza de Vaca presents the situation throughout the Southwest, the native tribes were in continual war with their neighbors, conflict fueled by

scarcity, starvation and near starvation the usual state. Yet survival depended on the trade of foodstuffs, tools, and even powders for the body to enhance one's power. Raids on the resources of neighboring tribes could accomplish trade, or women could be sent to negotiate exchanges. Cabeza de Vaca stepped into the unmanly role of negotiator. He now had a double role of slave and negotiator-trader, both essentially women's roles. Trading was a relief in that it lessened the hard labor. As he moved between tribes, he gained knowledge of what lay ahead in the adjoining territory as he worked forever westward.

But it was the third role, that of shaman-healer, dictated by the natives on Galveston Island, that provided the most possibilities and was to prove his salvation:

The Islanders wanted to make physicians of us without examination or a review of diplomas. Their method of cure is to blow on the sick, the breath and the laying-on of hands supposedly casting out the infirmity. They insisted we should do this too and be of some use to them (Covey, 64).

Cabeza de Vaca and his co-religionists "scoffed at their cures and at the idea we know how to heal" (Covey, 64). Reading somewhat between the lines, this role was troubling. Would practicing native shamanism jeopardize the Christians' relation with their God, preclude salvation? But the natives withheld food and "Hunger forced us to obey" (Covey, 64). The solution was to combine Christian iconography with native practice, an example of syncretism that sets the tone for experience in the New World:

Our method, however, was to bless the sick, breathe upon them, recite a Pater noster and Ave Maria, and pray earnestly to God our Lord for their recovery. When we concluded with the sign of the cross, He willed that our patients should directly spread the news that they had been restored to health (Covey, 64).

Cabeza bridged recognizable medicine man practices and his Christian faith: The medicine-man makes incisions over the point of the pain, sucks the wound, and cauterizes it. This remedy enjoys high repute among the Indians. I have, as a matter of fact, tried it on myself with good results. The medicine-men blow on the spot they have treated, as a finishing touch, and the patient regards himself as relieved (Covey, 64).

He faced the very American problem of syncretism—bringing unlike, even contradictory, beliefs and practices together—more successfully than did his better-educated companion Castillo, who had attended the University of Salamanca. Where Castillo, initially more popular as a shaman among the natives, hesitated, Cabeza plunged ahead, near the end of the journey going beyond prayer and signs of the cross to perform the first surgery in North America, removing an arrowhead from near the heart.

The account to Charles V is careful to convey unshakable faith and adherence to Christian practice, but there also seem vast silences, and to the modern reader the assurances are not completely convincing. According to Cabeza de Vaca the native shaman was outside the normal social order, allowed several wives when the norm was one, and Cabeza is silent on what sexually intimate social life he may have lived. What native practices, ones he may have participated in, does he hide? But the Christian faith healers were treated kindly by thankful "Indians [who] deprived themselves of food to give to us,

and presented us skins and other tokens of gratitude" (Covey, 65). (13). Cabeza de Vaca's depiction of the native spiritual life implies an appreciation for the healing power of certain ceremonies, but he conveys native belief as empty, fearful, and at times based in dreams which order killing, even of children. Fear replaced love: One tribal group (the Mariames) "cast away their daughters at birth; the dogs ate them" (Covey, 78). The tribe feared incest taboos and at the same time did not want warring neighbors to marry their women for fear the children would multiply their enemies. He relates a story that terrified the Avavares, which modern scholarship sees as an origin myth, the visitation of Mr. Badthing, who could appear as man or woman:

They said that a little man wandered through the region whom they called Mr. Badthing [Mala Costa]. He had a beard and they never saw his features distinctly. When he came to a house, the inhabitants trembled and their hair stood on end. A blazing brand would suddenly shine at the door as he rushed in and seized whom he chose, deeply gashing him in the side with a very sharp flint two palms long and a hand wide. He would thrust his hand through the gashes, draw out the entails, cut a palm's length from one, and throw it into the embers. Then he would gash an arm three times, the second cut on the inside of the elbow, and would sever the limb. A little later he would begin to rejoin it, and the touch of his hands would instantly heal the wound....he never ate...he pointed to a crevice in the ground and said his home was there below. (Covey, 90)

Underlying the story of violent wounding and the fear of death, is the desire to be healed. Throughout his account Cabeza de Vaca emphasizes the value that natives placed on healing which parallels the value Christians placed on salvation. In this instance, Cabeza de Vaca offered Christianity as the antidote to Mr. Badthing, assuring the natives "...if they would believe in God our Lord and become Christians like us, they need never fear him....This delighted them and they lost much of their dread" (Covey, 90).

Toward the end of the journey, the four faith healers are passed from tribe to tribe, the tribe conveying them taking the goods of the tribe receiving them in a potlatch. To recover the taken goods, the deprived tribe would pass the Christians on to the next people, where the process was repeated. "They feared they would die if they returned without fulfilling this obligation," according to Cabeza de Vaca (Covey, 128).

The native peoples had found a way of accepting Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions within the shaman tradition with its emphasis on healing. Cabeza de Vaca and his companions, cast into a Christlike situation, found a way to meet the New World spirituality and form a bridge to it. He, like the later Hispanic curanderos, was considered a folk saint or saint of the people while he was still alive. The natives voiced their spiritual bond on their own terms. When Cabeza de Vaca and his companions rejoined their co-religionists in Mexico, the commander Alcaraz wanted their help to enslave the six hundred natives who accompanied them and another 600 who were hiding:

Alcaraz bade his interpreter tell the Indians that we were members of his race who had been long lost; that his group were the lords of the land who must be obeyed and served, while we were inconsequential. The Indians paid

no attention to this. Conferring among themselves, they replied that the Christians lied: We had come from the sunrise, they from the sunset; we healed the sick, they killed the sound; we came naked and barefoot, they clothed, horsed, and lanced; we coveted nothing but gave whatever we were given, while they robbed whomever they found and bestowed nothing on anyone

(Covey, 128).

As he amassed followers and approached Spanish-held territory, Cabeza de Vaca played up the role of superhuman authority the natives bestowed upon him. He asserted and extended his authority by socially distancing himself from the peoples he cured. He did this through silence and rarely speaking. The black Moor Estevanico lost what equality he may have enjoyed with the three Christians and was ordered to carry out the role of go-between. He was sent ahead to arrange things and the natives spoke through him. Is Cabeza de Vaca's strategy dictated by ego, an attempt to enforce obedience to the Christian message, or a way of accelerating the journey Westward?

Was he changed, transformed by the experience?

Did he contribute to the curandero tradition?

How much of a factor was he in changing Spanish practices (14)?

As some historians put it, the two world-shaking events in Western culture and even in world history are the birth of Christ and the encounter of Christopher Columbus with the New World. With Columbus the world becomes

one. Cabeza de Vaca embodies these two events within himself: the discoverer of new lands and a profound believer in the Christian faith. His experience increased his awareness of shared humanity and his understanding of native Americans as it deepened his religious insight, strengthened instead of weakened his sense of identity, and intensified his sense of mission, converting the natives to his vision of God's love.

The encounter causes open wounds in the New World, the elimination of entire cultures from the face of the earth and the decimation of the native peoples mostly by European diseases. From Cabeza de Vaca's viewpoint it is not a matter of whether the Christians will impose themselves and conquer the New World. By 1538 when he ends his journey, the Spaniards are well entrenched.

It is how the Christians will extend their faith and administer the new domains. Cabeza de Vaca addresses the crucial questions: Are the natives receptive to the Christian faith? Do they have the ability to reason?

The account to Charles V is one in which Cabeza de Vaca, within his understanding, mediates Old World and New. The account is an act of healing.

End Notes

1. Interpretations of the Relacion include: "Cabeza de Vaca," Producciones Iguana in co-production with Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografia, New Horizon Home Video, 1993), music (George Antheil, "Cabeza Vaca: a cantata based on the experience and letters of Alvar Nunez, 'Cabeza de Vaca,'" 1961).
2. Quotes in this paper are from Covey's translation of the Relacion : de Vaca, Cabeza. Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America. Trans. Cyclone

Covey. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. An authoritative three volume work (Adorno, Rolena, and Pautz, Patrick Charles. 3 vols. Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999) provides helpful commentary and context in addition to Cabeza de Vaca's works in translation.

3. see "The Problem of Conquest: Revisited, A Revised Discussion" by Charles W. Polzer, S.J. on the Southwest Texas website:

<http://www.english.swt.edu/CSS/CWPolzerCDV.HTML>

4. The three companions were: Alonzo del Castillo Maldonado, Andres Dorantes de Carranca and his slave Estevanico the Black. Castillo and Dorantes married wealthy widows in Mexico City. Estevanico guided the 1539 expedition of Fray Marcos de Niza up the western coast of Mexico to Arizona and into New Mexico a year before the Coronado expedition. Offended, apparently by his greed, demand for women and violation of their customs, the Zuni Indians killed him at the village of Hawikuh near the Zuni River in New Mexico. Estevanico's behavior when on his own underlines the controlling authority of Cabeza de Vaca.

5. Cabeza de Vaca turned down the offer to be second-in-command of the de Soto expedition. In addition to not wanting to repeat the powerlessness experienced with the failed Narvaez adventure, he disagreed with de Soto on the treatment of the natives. Oviedo y Valdes in *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, 1851-55, reports that de Soto "was given very much to hunting to kill Indians," according to

Howard, David A. *Conquistador in Chains*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1997, 33.

6. As treasurer of the Narvaez expedition he was the king's personal representative, responsible for collecting the Charles' five percent of all precious metals and stones. He had to report how obediently and efficiently royal decrees were carried out. The Spanish Court ordered that he also serve as Provost-Marshal, an office that placed him in charge of military discipline. (Terrell, John Upton. *Estevanico The Black*. Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1968, 20).

6. "History and Importance," no author given,

<http://www.english.swt.edu/CSS/BackgroundCDV.HTML>

7. *ibid.*

8. see "Response to Cabeza de Vaca's Narratives in Regard to Healing Methods and His Role as a Folk Healer as Compared with Three Curanderos (A Position Paper)" by Eliseo Torres, The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, on the Southwest Texas website:

<http://www.english.swt.edu/CSS/CWPolzerCDV.HTML>

9. Howard, 14-15

10. Polzer, 2

11. On returning to the New World as the governor of the Rio de la Plata province (Paraguay and part of Brazil) he insisted on paying the natives for the food his Spanish troops consumed; his fairness toward the natives led to a Spanish revolt and he was brought home in chains.

12. But there was a setback in his shaman role when Cabeza de Vaca himself

was taken seriously ill on the mainland with a Capogue tribe. After a year of hard labor he escaped and became a "neutral merchant" between tribes whose "incessant hostilities made it impossible for them to travel cross-country or make exchanges," (Covey, 66), the consensus being that he got as far as Oklahoma. He exchanged sea-snails, conchs for gutting, sea-beads and bean from mesquite trees (used for medicine and ritual beverage) for skins, red ochre for facial ornament, hard canes for arrow, flint for arrowheads, sinews and cement to attach them, and deer hair. He remained in the coast region nearly six years, delaying his journey in order to round up the few surviving Christians to go west with him.

13. In his *Apologetica historia sumaria*, written during the 1550s, Las Casas drew on Cabeza de Vaca's experience in North America to support his conclusion that wars against the natives were so unjust that they should not be enslaved.

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