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## Conquest, Conversion, and the Hybrid Self in Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*

Alan J. Silva

"Discovery" is such a loaded term nowadays in American cultural studies that one dare not use it without immediately qualifying it as problematic and politically charged. We tend to prefer "invasion" or "dispossession" or "conquest" because those words, and their attendant categories, suggest a more accurate way to characterize early American exploration. Recognition of "discovery" as a euphemism stems from our historical revisionism: we know the "discoverer" is really a "conqueror" or "imperialist." As Francis Jennings has explained, "European explorers and invaders discovered an inhabited land" and they "invaded and displaced a resident population" (15). The imperialistic colonizer, in most early versions of the American myth, majestically sweeps into the New World in the name of God and national pride to conquer the virgin land and the savage creatures who inhabit it. The colonizer, in our revised history, is the outside observer who subordinates the culture of the Other and leaves it, in the wake of conquest, in a heap of ruins. [1]

We would not want to minimize the systematic violence inherent in the colonizing venture. But to characterize the New World explorer as solely a "conqueror" or "invader" tends to simplify the relationship between colonizer and colonized. As Homi Bhabha has suggested, generalizations of this sort make false distinctions between Self and Other. He argues instead for treatment of a unified "colonial subject" through an examination of the interpenetrating relationship between colonizer and colonized (Bhabha 1994, 110-6). As Bhabha explains further, shifting our focus from "the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of *subjectification*," would reveal the exercise, not just the outcome, of colonial power (Bhabha 1986, 149).

Homi Bhabha's theory of the "hybrid" colonial subject, and his focus on the production and maintenance of colonial power, has compelling implications for the relationship between European explorers and Native Americans in Cabeza de Vaca's 1542 discovery narrative *La Relación*. Several scholars have commented on Cabeza de Vaca's hybridity—the collision between his Spanish heritage and his acquisition of Native American culture—but none has discussed it in terms of the exercise of colonial power and its resultant ambiguities. Some critics focus on Cabeza de Vaca's relative skills in reintegrating into European culture after coming in contact with Native Americans and undergoing a series of identity shifts from discoverer to ethnographer and finally to quasi-missionary. Others discuss Cabeza de Vaca as a prototype for the modern-day Chicano and make broad connections between the Spanish discovery narrative and the emergence of a national American literary tradition. [2] My goal is to interrogate the relationship between colonizer and colonized in one specific colonial project and to understand how an

"outsider" and an "insider" can retain his conqueror's mentality yet simultaneously become more sympathetic to native customs, how an "Indianized" Spaniard can both recognize the problems inherent in the concept of "discovery," but still wish to colonize the natives.

Cabeza de Vaca's numerous identity shifts from conquistador to captive to missionary and his transformation into "Indianized Spaniard" take place over a wide terrain in the New World. Many attempts have been made to understand the precise geographical locations of Cabeza de Vaca during his expedition and to pinpoint the actual native groups with whom he came in contact, but thus far we can only be certain about the general contours of the story. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was appointed treasurer on a Spanish expedition designed to colonize the region along the Gulf of Mexico in 1527. Hostilities with native populations and a shortage of food forced the group to retreat from the coast of Florida; during the retreat, various storms caused Cabeza de Vaca and his small party to be separated from the rest of the Spaniards and eventually this small group made their way into modern-day Texas. During this period, Cabeza de Vaca lived as a captive with various native tribes for several years until finally escaping and returning to Spanish settlements in Mexico.

Scholars have had considerable difficulty trying to ascertain more specific geographical and chronological references beyond these general details. As Martin A. Favata and José B. Fernández have pointed out, Cabeza de Vaca's own "lack of instruments for reckoning latitude; the probable miscalculation of days and dates (understandably, given their condition and the vicissitudes they faced); and the lack of writing materials, which made them totally dependent upon memory," have led to many "deficiencies and inaccuracies" in the scholarship. Even with further work by anthropologists, we have not gained a precise understanding of Cabeza de Vaca's route largely because the data comes from a modern-day understanding of locations and peoples that have changed in the past 450 years and because these interpretations must be balanced against the often inaccurate "*perceptions of the castaways*" themselves (14-6).

Not only do these efforts to determine geography and chronology rely on scant evidence, but they also tend to mislead us into viewing Cabeza de Vaca as a fixed "self" and his contact with the native populations as a stable relationship. Trying to determine exactly where Cabeza de Vaca is located and precisely which tribes with whom he came in contact creates a familiar and simplistic formula of colonizer and colonized as "conqueror" and "victim." But the colonial project is far more slippery and unstable than these formulas would have us believe, and *La Relación* is significant because it provides us with insight into the *ongoing* exercise of colonial power and the *continuing process* of racist constructions. If we simply see the text as "racist" and the players as "conquerors" or "victims," we foreclose dialogue on the impulses of and responses to colonization. Investigating the processes of the colonial project invites us to examine the very construction of racism and the ways in which members of different cultures interact when they come in contact with each other.

At stake in *La Relación* are the various negotiations the colonizer must make as he becomes relocated in a middle space between two cultures, tenuously holding to one while simultaneously becoming part of the other. Cabeza de Vaca has to balance multiple identities within a nascent "Indianized" European self. This transformation minimally presents two central challenges to the identity and function of the colonizer in the New World: How can the newly formed ethnographer-self situate his cultural relativism both with the discoverer-self who was more concerned with conquest and subjectification of the natives and the missionary-self whose reduction of ethnocentrism and the conquest motive serves only to strengthen his desire to Christianize the Other? And if the hybridized colonizer assimilates into native culture and views the indigenous population not as "evil" or "diabolical," then what happens to the colonizing impulse?

Before he becomes an ethnographer, Cabeza de Vaca possesses all of the Eurocentric and racist attitudes of his contemporaries. While he does on occasion note the positive physical attributes of the natives, "admirable proportions, very spare and of great activity and strength," and comments on their physical prowess, "the power and skill" with which they can shoot their arrows, he nevertheless sees them as strange, something less than, or perhaps more than human, creatures

who are "naked" and "large of body" and who "appear at a distance like giants" (39). [3] He is also unable or unwilling to comprehend features of their culture such as ritual burial. During his sojourn along the west coast of Florida, he and his party see a number of cases "in each of them a dead man" with the bodies "covered with painted deer skins." They believe, as Cabeza de Vaca explains, that this is some "kind of idolatry" and so the Commissary orders the cases and bodies burned (24). Cabeza de Vaca also cannot understand why his party is met with such hostility along the Florida coast. Despite capturing, enslaving, and killing some of the natives, as well as destroying their property, he finds a Native American attack most surprising, for they "fell suddenly upon us," both on his leader's party and even those "who were very sick, scattered along the shore." The fierce attack—three times during the night in which Cabeza de Vaca himself was "wounded in the face"—does not indicate to them that they should leave the area (53-4). It merely signals the uncivilized brutality of pagans who have no regard for "Christians" who constantly "commend" themselves to "God our Lord" to withstand the perils of the New World (52-3).

In these early stages of his narrative, Cabeza de Vaca constructs the native as Other, as warrior, pagan, savage, in effect everything that the Spanish colonizers are not. The natives in fact are always read, as Albert Memmi describes in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, in a rhetoric of Not, as a "lack, a void, as deficient in the values of society" (83). The colonizer divides the world, as Nancy Hartsock has explained, into "an omnipotent subject at the center" and "marginal Others as sets of negative qualities." Described another way, following from Hartsock's application of Aristotle's rules of logic to colonial relations, if we arbitrarily label the Spaniard as "A," then everyone who is not a Spaniard cannot be "A," but must be "not-A" (22, 24). The "not-A" is necessarily impure because it is by definition a negative category. In the early parts of the narrative, both Spaniards and Native Americans fall into these two categories and both are defined in terms of "A": everyone is either a Spaniard or a not-Spaniard. This dichotomy reinforces Cabeza de Vaca's ethnocentric views. Because he has only one positive term in his formulation of the world, he cannot perceive similarities between the two groups. Upon leaving the Florida coast on a barge, Cabeza de Vaca notes that one of the barges sinks and three men are drowned. Members of the local tribe offer sympathy for their plight. Cabeza de Vaca does not, however, liken their reactions to a typical European response (sorrow for another's tragedy), but rather finds it "strange to see these men, wild and untaught, howling like brutes over our misfortunes" (69). Despite his observations of the productivity and efficiency of the hunting and gathering societies in the Texas hill country, Cabeza de Vaca still muses that "it would be a very fruitful region were it worked and inhabited by civilized men" (113). And despite the natives' ability to "know and understand the differences of the seasons, when the fruits come to ripen, where the fish resort, and the position of the stars," all of which Cabeza de Vaca acknowledges, he nevertheless concludes that the natives "are all ignorant of time, either by the sun or moon, nor do they reckon by the month or year" (124).

Albert Memmi has argued that the colonized is always degraded because "the colonialist stresses those things that keep him separate rather than emphasizing that which might contribute to the foundation of a joint community" (71). Although the preceding passages certainly indicate Cabeza de Vaca's ethnocentrism, he is not simply focusing on differences, but actually misreading similarities. He describes features of both Spanish and native cultures: empathy, economic productivity, historical chronology. This ability to focus on but misperceive similarities provides an avenue into the transformations he will undergo as a captive in the Texas interior where he will subsequently learn to append central features of Native American customs to Spanish culture. As Homi Bhabha explains, the colonizer constructs Otherness so that it contains traces of ambivalence and anxiety about its own authority. Although the colonizer resists similarities with the Other, he "must maintain identity with the Other to valorize control over it" (Bhabha 1994, 86-7). Two conflicting modes of thought—one that Others the natives, the other that fetishizes similarities—surface in Cabeza de Vaca's narrative causing him to rethink his relationship to the colonized native.

As a Spanish Christian, Cabeza de Vaca does not want to be "Indian," a figure he has previously constructed as "pagan savage." But to perceive the natives only as "beasts" would not allow him to control them. They would be incapable of serving the Spanish conquistador. He must, therefore, construct Otherness in terms of his

own Spanish Christian self, a complicated maneuver because the construction is both a reflection of a self he has always believed himself to possess, yet a denial of a self he slowly seems to be becoming. Homi Bhabha explains that the colonizer's sense of self is always intricately bound to the colonized: "colonial discourse depends upon a complex articulation of narcissism and aggressivity"—two paradoxical forms of the colonizer's identification with the colonized (Bhabha 1986, 164). Identifying with the Other, even in this complex manner, will eventually force Cabeza de Vaca to recognize the similarities. It will also reshape the colonizing impulse, in particular, his view of Christianity: if the natives and Spaniards have similar cognitive structures, most especially the capacity and willingness to believe in God and to worship Him, then he can use Christianity as a tool for colonization. [4]

Cabeza de Vaca's authority is further complicated—even ruptured—during his captivity in the Texas interior, when the natives force him to serve as a merchant and shaman. Although he still cannot fully participate in the same survival strategies of the natives, they gradually force him to assimilate into their culture and to acquire a quasi-relativistic approach to their customs. He still cannot "eat the flesh" of the horses that are slaughtered, but does, nevertheless, begin to record with an ethnographic eye, some of the burial rituals of one of the local tribes (68):

When it occurs that a son dies, the parents and kindred weep as does every body; the wailing continuing for him a whole year. They begin before dawn every day, the parents first and after them the whole town. They do the same at noon and at sunset. After a year of mourning has passed, the rites of the dead are performed; then they wash and purify themselves from the stain of smoke. They lament all the deceased in this manner, except the aged, for whom they show no regret, as they say that their season has passed, they having no enjoyment, and that living they would occupy the earth and take aliment from the young. Their custom is to bury the dead, unless it be those among them who have been physicians. These they burn. While the fire kindles they are all dancing and making high festivity, until the bones become powder. After the lapse of a year the funeral honors are celebrated, every one taking part in them, when that dust is presented in water for the relatives to drink (75-6).

Instead of assuming "pagan ignorance" as he did earlier, Cabeza de Vaca now attends to the structure and symbols of the ceremony. Although he does not discuss the symbols as part of a systematic pattern, nor explain the structure in terms of the status of the participants, he becomes an (unwilling) participant observer himself, the key technique, as Bronislaw Malinowski defines it, of ethnography.

Although the term "ethnographer" is traditionally associated with modern anthropology, it has been recently refigured into analyses of the "man on the spot" (to use James Frazer's words), the missionary, traveler, discoverer, and trader. As James Clifford has explained, modern anthropology did not invent ethnography as a methodological tool for describing native peoples, but grounded the technique of participant observation into cultural theory and empirical research and then institutionalized it as part of a formal, academic discipline (21-54). Like his modern counterparts, Cabeza de Vaca lived among the native tribes, participated in their daily activities, and learned to act as a member of the community. He learned, as would any ethnographer, the texture of village life and recorded his findings in his narrative. As Cabeza de Vaca explains,

There is another custom, which is, when a son or brother dies, at the house where the death takes place, they do not go after food for three months, but sooner famish, their relatives and neighbors providing what they eat. As in the time we were there a great number of the natives died, in most houses there was very great hunger, because of the keeping of their custom and observance...In this way we lived until April when we went to the sea shore, where we ate blackberries all the month... (77).

At moments such as these, Cabeza de Vaca both observes and participates in native life. He notes that one tribe hunts by following a "deer from morning to night" so as to exhaust it and eventually overtake it. They also gather "prickly pears," squeeze the juice from them, using that juice for a beverage, and then dry the fruit which becomes their only sustenance for months (104-5). Cabeza de Vaca takes part in these practices, gathering the fruit and then making "fires, encircling the people with them, burning rotten and wet wood" so as to drive away the high concentration of mosquitos. "We did little else than shed tears from the smoke that came into our eyes," he laments, "besides feeling intense heat from the many fires" (105).

As Cabeza de Vaca becomes a participant observer, or "goes native," he gradually transforms the colonizing self of the Florida parts of the narrative into a middle phase between self and Other. At this point in the narrative, outsider observation gives way to an assertion of his presence during these rituals. This is, as James Clifford explains, what distinguishes Malinowski's fieldwork: as an ethnographer, he "actively composes" the other culture as he "redirects our attention to the observational standpoint" (22). We are keenly aware in these moments of Cabeza de Vaca's relational position to and continuous repositioning within native cultures. The key elements of the ethnographer—participation and observation—are inherent in Cabeza de Vaca's narrative and these features complicate his original colonialist objective to conquer and enslave. Because the discoverer-self has been radically altered into a partial repetition of the native self, he can no longer view his own imperial authority without ambivalence. The old, imperial self is at war with the new, refashioned one: under ordinary circumstances, the former would control the latter, but in this case, the two selves reside in the same person.

What maintains the friction within the hybridized colonizer is the very fact that he has become an ethnographer. Although its main proponent, Bronislaw Malinowski, admitted that ethnographic accounts could indeed be colored by the participant observer, he believed that the trained anthropologist, aware of his or her biases, could produce an objective and neutral (value-free) narrative (8-10). Both James Clifford and José Rabasa, however, have argued that the desire to be objective and neutral does not reduce the value-laden and power-ridden features of the ethnographer's discourse. "Communication," as Rabasa has explained, "requires that an addresser and an addressee recognize a referent in the interior of the message," but referents "can never be recognized as long as two different contexts or discourses mediate their significance" (196-7). As such, dialogue becomes even more complicated; the ethnographer represents the Other through a discourse laden with his own cultural preconceptions.

Cabeza de Vaca's ambiguous double identity and complicated discourse can be further examined by comparing his wavering between discoverer and ethnographer to the liminal moment in Victor Turner's description of the tripartite ritual process. As Turner explains, after the initiate is separated from the group or some social system, but before he or she is reincorporated into the culture, the neophyte passes through a "liminal" phase, a moment of limbo, when the "self is split up the middle," becomes both "subject and object, something that one both is and that one sees and, furthermore, acts upon as though it were another." In the liminal phase, ambivalence results from the desire to act upon "the self-made-other in such a way as to transform it" (Turner 1969, 94-5; 1987, 25). During the liminal phase, neophytes undergo a change in status: as Turner explains, "they may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia" or anything to indicate "rank or role" or "position in a kinship system" (Turner 1969, 95).

Although his liminality is not the result of willing participation in a ritual, Cabeza de Vaca's transformation into an ethnographer occurs during an indeterminate moment strikingly similar to the liminal phase. Through his various excursions through the interior of America, he constantly reminds his readers that he had to live "without clothes" among the natives. No longer does he have his status as colonizer, or even as a merchant or shaman; he becomes an object as much as he is a subject. In fact, the natives "other" him; he is frequently "looked at" by the males, who at times, send "their women and children to look" at him, who even

return and repeat their visits "afterwards on other days" (67). In this ambiguous middle ground, Cabeza de Vaca can no longer be certain who is "civilized" and who is "savage." He explains at one point that "Five Christians, of a mess on the coast, came to such extremity that they ate their dead; the body of the last one only was found unconsumed" (74). Cabeza de Vaca notes that this event "produced great commotion among the Indians, giving rise to so much censure that had they known it in season to have done so, doubtless they would have destroyed any survivor, and we should have found ourselves in the utmost perplexity" (74). But he is not agitated: he notes instead the difficulties of survival in the region. Even his Euro-Christian methods of healing are transformed by (or at least appended to) Native American medicine. The Christian method is to "bless the sick, breathing upon them, and recite a Pater-noster and an Ave-Maria, praying with all earnestness to God our Lord that he would give health and influence them to make us some good return." The tribal shaman, instead, "scarifies over the seat of pain, and then sucks about the wound." This "remedy," as Cabeza de Vaca concludes, enjoys "high repute" among them, "which I have tried on myself and found benefit from it" (81). His eating habits change as well. Although he does not consume other people, he does not protest, as he had earlier over the "peculiar" eating habits of the local tribes, and partakes of their "raw meat" and "open hearts of deer" that the natives keep in "good supply for food" (127, 172).

The exchanges across the constantly shifting boundaries of self and Other create the relationship between the mixed colonizing self and colonized Other. Homi Bhabha has argued that this mixed self or "hybrid" is an indication of the "productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities." Rather than seeing colonization simply as "the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions," Bhabha suggests that we view it as the production of ambivalence about authority. The ambivalence of the colonizing self (containing part of the colonized self) "estranges the basis for authority," its "rules of recognition," disturbing authoritative representations so that the text no longer commands the same authority but instead raises questions about it. Although the colonizer still maintains the language of conquest and the dominant discourse, he cannot identify or evaluate the Other because it is no longer "there" to be seen or appropriated (Bhabha 1985, 173-5). Its presence is too intermixed into the colonizer to be represented in the same way. This does not exclude representation, but rather alters it: the narrative becomes "mimicry" in Homi Bhabha's words, a partial representation or recognition of the colonized Other that continually slips between the representation of Other and the disclosure of "the ambivalence of colonial discourse" (Bhabha 1994, 86-9).

This ambivalence is registered in the simultaneous maintenance of a Christian identity and the loss of the discoverer-self. The discoverer in Spanish exploration literature, as Beatriz Bodmer points out, is traditionally a figure of military superiority and of mythic proportion, the epic hero riding on the majestic horse to conquer the natives (132). But in *La Relación* Cabeza de Vaca describes his party's constant struggle to find food, in fact, its need to *eat* the horses in order to survive and, as a result, having to walk—barefoot and naked—across the rough terrain. Both the loss of the horses and of clothes signify the destruction of the discoverer as mythic hero and the substitution of a man simply trying to survive.

Even "self as Christian" is not a stable identity; ambivalence about the role and function of Christianity results from the continual slipping between representing and recognizing the Other. Cabeza de Vaca certainly begins a project of converting the natives; he believes that if he could control the means of communication, he would have an effective tool for evangelization: "Could we have had the use of language by which to make ourselves perfectly understood, we should have left them all Christians" (169). Houston Baker has explained that cultural contact produces "semantic competition"; whomever controls the language (of the way one is named and the meanings it implies) can authorize the identity of both Self and Other (Baker 33-6). [5] To learn the language of the Other allows him to gain control over both his captors as well as himself and to subsume both of those identities into the category of "Christian." But "Christian" is now an unstable term: cultural contact has radically altered, indeed estranged it from its original meaning. He wants the natives to be Christians like him, but he is not the same Christian that he once was. His Christian-self has been modified by the experience of captivity producing a new self that depends upon the Other for its identity. The hybrid self is part Christian and part Native American, neither one but related to

both. Cabeza de Vaca does not quite conjoin his Christian "self" to the community, but rather has learned to rethink his sense of Christianity in terms of another culture's practices. He does not reject Christianity either, but rather absorbs the traditions of native culture in order to refigure his paradoxical role of an outsider within his own culture.

This new identity is authorized to represent the natives from an ambivalent stance of previously conquered and enslaved colonizer. After his escape from captivity, he makes his way to a region where he finds "fellow" Christians. He grows angry with his countrymen for "they wished to make slaves of the Indians" in the area (186). The natives, he exclaims, are settled in this region; they are planting corn for the sustenance of their community. Fearing that the Christians will enslave them, Cabeza de Vaca urges the natives to go back to their homes. They refuse; they "were willing to do nothing until they had gone with us and delivered us into the hands of other Indians" (186). These natives mistake Cabeza de Vaca's party for other Indians and fear that these Christians will enslave them. Despite Cabeza de Vaca's objections, the natives equate the "Christians" with themselves, reading Cabeza de Vaca and his party as part of the indigenous population: "[Cabeza de Vaca and his group] had come whence the sun rises, and they [the other Christians] whence it goes down; [Cabeza de Vaca's group] healed the sick, they killed the sound; [his group] had come naked and barefooted, while they had arrived in clothing and on horses with lances" (186). Although Cabeza de Vaca eventually persuades the natives to return to their homes, he cannot "convince the Indians that [he and his party] were of the Christians" (187). In each of these instances, Cabeza de Vaca is still "speaking for" the natives, still attempting to represent them, but his voice has been altered into mimicry: he simultaneously articulates the desires of the natives from the outsider's perspective while disavowing the motives of the colonizers.

Despite (or perhaps because of) his objections to the Christians and his lack of affiliation with them in the preceding scene, Cabeza de Vaca still relies upon Christianity as a resource during his interactions with the natives. Many of the anecdotes he chooses to record in *La Relación* relate his merits as a Christian evangelizer, a man who heals through the power of (the Christian) God. He describes several incidents in which the natives ask him and his party to remedy their illnesses. They have great success in curing the natives of "great pain in the head," of cramps, and even, on one remarkable occasion, of "death" (117, 120-2). This last example deserves close examination. Cabeza de Vaca is taken to a hut where he finds "that the sick man we went to heal was dead." The natives also believe he is dead: as Cabeza de Vaca explains, "Many persons were around him weeping, and his house was prostrate, a sign that the one who dwelt in it is no more." Although he finds the man's "eyes rolled up, and the pulse gone," and "having all the appearances of death," Cabeza de Vaca, nevertheless, says he "supplicated our Lord as fervently as I could," blessed him and breathed upon him, and then left to treat many others who were ill. Later than evening, as Cabeza de Vaca explains, the natives reported to him that "he who had been dead and for whom I wrought before them, had got up whole and walked, had eaten and spoken with them, and that to all whom I had ministered were well and much pleased" (121-2).

The story of raising a man from the dead is one of the key moments in Cabeza de Vaca's transformation from conquistador to missionary and a crucial demonstration in front of the natives of the tremendous power of Christianity. Possibly, Cabeza de Vaca and the local natives could not detect the man's pulse or breathing because his vital signs were too faint and too shallow. Or perhaps Cabeza de Vaca could detect those signs and the natives could not; he would not have known if the man would recover, but blessing him and breathing on him would certainly increase his status in the community if the man did recover. Possibly, too, this was a miraculous recovery. Maureen Ahern has argued that all of Cabeza de Vaca's healing rituals, including this one, appropriate signs from native religion, transform them by the use of Christian religious symbols, and then retransmit them to the natives. The natives recognize the spiritual power inherent in the sign because it is related to their own religious symbols; Cabeza de Vaca himself is encouraged to continue his healing methods because the signs have become sufficiently Christianized (Ahern 215-44). Certainly, this view would account for the psychological elements of general physical ailments and the healing of those general illnesses: patient and physician both recognize the presence of their own

religious customs in the treatment process. But it does not satisfactorily solve the more complicated matter of resurrecting someone from the dead. Through the use of religious signs, the shaman can impart his confidence to the ill patient during treatment, and the patient can likewise imbibe that confidence from the ritual process, but the two cannot have this exchange when one of them is presumably dead.

We probably cannot know for sure what exactly happened in this remarkable scene in the narrative, or if it happened, or how Cabeza de Vaca was able to accomplish it if it did indeed happen. We can, however, understand more about the colonizing process by focusing on Cabeza de Vaca's interest in including this tale in *La Relación*. His story of raising a man from the dead parallels the story of Lazarus from the Gospel of John when Jesus raised the "dead man" after everyone had lost hope. The raising of Lazarus in Bethany is one of Jesus' most powerful instructional tales: it signifies the power of God to perform miracles and it typifies the death and resurrection of Jesus Himself. [6] By offering a parallel story, Cabeza de Vaca draws upon his power to acquire status among the natives: his God is *the* Supreme Being and he is God's most successful emissary. He also reformulates our understanding of the colonizer; in some sense, Cabeza de Vaca is a "type" of Christ. Throughout the narrative, and especially during his captivity, Cabeza de Vaca implicitly likens himself to Jesus' spiritual trials in the desert, his fasting forty days and forty nights, and his withstanding several temptations by the devil. Cabeza de Vaca survives in the wilderness just as Jesus did and returns to the community to perform "miracles." The Jews who witnessed Jesus miraculously raise Lazarus from the dead "put their faith in Him" and then returned to the Pharisees to report what Jesus had done. Likewise, as Cabeza de Vaca notes, this event "caused great wonder and fear, and throughout the land the people talked of nothing else. All to whom the fame of it reached, came to seek us that we should cure them and bless their children" (122). [7]

Christianity, in a scene such as this, is a method that empowers the colonizer and enables him to control the indigenous population. Shortly after the Lazarus-like resurrection, Cabeza de Vaca offers an analogous story by recounting the tale of "Badthing." The local tribe relates an "extraordinary circumstance" that occurred "fifteen or sixteen years" ago:

They said that a man wandered through the country whom they called Badthing; he was small of body and wore beard, and they never distinctly saw his features. When he came to the house where they lived, their hair stood up and they trembled. Presently a blazing torch shone at the door, when he entered and seized whom he chose, and giving him three great gashes in the side with a very sharp flint, the width of the hand and two palms in length, he put his hand through them, drawing forth the entrails, from one of which he would cut off a portion more or less, the length of a palm, and throw it on the embers. Then he would give three gashes to an arm, the second cut on the inside of an elbow, and would sever the limb. A little after this, he would begin to unite it, and putting his hands on the wounds, these would instantly become healed. They said that frequently in the dance he appeared among them, sometimes in the dress of a woman, at others in that of a man... they asked him whence he came and where was his abiding place, and he showed them a fissure in the earth and said that his house was there below (123-4).

Cabeza de Vaca explains that the Spaniards initially "laughed at and ridiculed" this story. But the natives produce evidence: they bring "many of those they said he had seized; and we saw the marks of the gashes made in the places according to the manner they had described" (124). Cabeza de Vaca is not interested in examining the wounds nor determining how they were inflicted. Instead, he sees this as an opportunity to instruct the natives:

We told them he was an evil one, and in the best way we could, gave them to understand, that if they would believe in God our Lord, and become Christians like us, they need have no fear of him, nor would he dare to come and inflict those injuries, and they might be certain he

would not venture to appear while we remained in the land. At this they were delighted and lost much of their dread (124).

Christianity not only gives Cabeza de Vaca the means to interpret unusual phenomena, but also increases his ability to control the natives' interpretations. The "Badthing" story is an inversion of his own healing of the dead man carefully juxtaposed immediately after the Lazarus-like resurrection takes place. Although Badthing's healing takes place after he inflicts damage on people, why should the natives not believe in him but instead put their faith in Cabeza de Vaca? In both cases, a healing takes place, and in both the healer is from a mysterious, unknown place. In both instances, whether the healing is repairing a limb or raising a dead man, the process remains a mystery. But as Cabeza de Vaca explains in the preceding passage, Christianity has given him the authority to validate or invalidate an interpretation. The natives must believe in him because he not only heals people, but he also knows how to interpret various methods of healing. As a result, he reduces yet controls the fears of the local tribe. After he tells them to put their faith in him, they "lose much of their dread"; he could, however, just as easily increase their fears by reminding them of Badthing's potential return unless they heed his (Christian) warnings.

Rolena Adorno has argued that Cabeza de Vaca's ability to negotiate away the natives' fears of the Spanish allows for his peaceful resettlement of the local tribes. Certainly, Cabeza de Vaca has a keen sense of the rhetoric of fear, but his skillfulness does more than "resettle" the natives. His successful negotiation (and manipulation) of fear suggests his interest in strengthening his evangelical objective (don't be afraid of Christians) and indicates his skill at recentering fear onto the wise interpreter of such phenomena (be afraid of me). Although Adorno argues that the ultimate goal for Cabeza de Vaca is not to Christianize the natives, "for he himself underscored the fact that conversion did not take place," the goal of negotiation is inextricably bound to his newly-fashioned concept of conversion (Adorno 1993, 74). Whether he succeeds or not in converting the natives is a moot point: he writes the narrative from the perspective of a missionary and he persuasively shows us that conversion is a methodology (a way of thinking about the New World), rather than a specific outcome (how many people did he actually convert). This new methodology, coupled with Cabeza de Vaca's rhetorical skillfulness, controls the natives' perceptions of the colonizer and yields a newly-empowered (although altered) colonizing self.

By selecting to tell the Badthing story, and juxtapose it after his own "miraculous performance," Cabeza de Vaca also offers his Spanish readers a demonstration of the effectiveness of the Christian voice in colonizing the New World. In many other discovery narratives, the conquistador believes himself to be a chosen prophet called by God to subject the newly-discovered cultures to Spanish rule through whatever means necessary, whether it be enslavement or murder. [8] In the words of Beatriz Bodmer, the Spanish conquistador had a "religious justification resting both on a perceived obligation of the Christian monarchs and their vassals to extend the Christian empire" (18). But Cabeza de Vaca does not play that role: he wants to convert the natives, not enslave them. As such, the colonizer seems to lose all his force—he has failed to conquer the natives. But he does not if we redefine our understanding of the colonizer (as Cabeza de Vaca does himself) as someone who must survive spiritual and physical trials in order to represent God and work out His divine plan. Cabeza de Vaca becomes a hero if we accept his story as a successful, although altered, version of conquest; he is a "hero" because he passes his spiritual and physical trials. He repackages his military and political failures as spiritual success by marshaling evidence of a conquest that gained control of no new territory and enslaved no Native Americans for the Spanish crown.

Not only then is the colonizer an ambiguous figure to both us and himself, but so is his tale. Both self and discursive practice are destabilized and made ambiguous by cultural contact. *La Relación* is written as an anti-conquest tale; the whole narrative is informed by this perspective. As such, it becomes *more* powerful (more rhetorically persuasive) and *more* politically problematic (because its politics are less accessible and harder to resist). The preamble, addressed to the "Sacred Caesarian Catholic Majesty," appeals to the King to "subdue those countries and bring them to a knowledge of the true faith and true Lord, and under the imperial dominion" (12). Later in the narrative, he explains that to increase their authority

over the natives, they taught them about the Christian God. And, on another occasion, in a side note to the King of Spain, Cabeza de Vaca thanks God that "in the days of your Majesty, under your might and dominion, these nations should come to be thoroughly and voluntarily subject to the Lord, who has created and redeemed us" (195). *La Relación*, as a tale of religious conversion, rather than military conquest, becomes an even more persuasive tool for colonization. As Rolena Adorno has explained, Cabeza de Vaca's expedition was so exemplary it would later be called an "act of pacification," rather than a conquest. His narrative is so skillful that it even swayed people who condemned such conquests. [9] In *La Relación*, Cabeza de Vaca can thus impose his will on a people, but make the imposition read like counter-conquest because he couches it in the language of proposal. It has profound impact on others precisely because it is so politically deceptive.

We return now to the first of two questions (in slightly modified form) posed at the beginning of this essay: How does Cabeza de Vaca negotiate the multiple identities of ethnographer, missionary, and discoverer? Regardless of the role he plays, Cabeza de Vaca is always ambivalent about the authority of his representations of the native. As ethnographer, he is certainly concerned with the texture of Native American life, but he cannot forego his cultural preconceptions even as he describes the natives from a more relativistic point of view. As missionary, he rejects the notion of native as "savage," someone who must be enslaved, in favor of the native as "worthy pagan," someone who can be converted. This new representation invalidates the traditional goals of conquest, but replaces it with an equally problematic paradigm of conquest. Even as discoverer, prior to these two identity transformations, Cabeza de Vaca experiences difficulties in distinguishing his colonizing approach from others. Early in the narrative, before he ventures into Florida, he has several disagreements with the head of the expedition Governor Narváez. In particular, he objects to the Governor's orders to leave the ships on the coast of Florida and to send an exploration party into the interior (26-7). In part, he is trying to vindicate his own actions on the Florida coast. But he is also caught in a web of conflicting codes of conduct that produce a certain ambiguity about the role and function of colonial leadership. These competing forms of authority are already beginning to shape and subvert personal identity even before he encounters the natives in Florida.

In all three cases, Cabeza de Vaca registers a variety of supportive and subversive impulses that complicate his attitude toward authority. This attitude creates the possibility for these multiple identities to coexist, even though they seem to have motives at odds with each other. Within any culture, as Stephen Greenblatt has shown, there will be an "elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies" (Greenblatt 1988, 7). [10] The central difference between these identities is that the post-cultural contact ones require much more sophisticated linguistic and rhetorical strategies to maintain the colonizing motive. No longer does the post-contact self wish to "conquer" the natives; he now wishes to "convert" them. This slip between conquer/convert is similar to other maneuvers in the narrative between representation/recognition and conquistador/missionary. "Enslavement" is now called "conversion"; "discovery" of treasures is spoken of as a project of "evangelizing" the native population; and the "conquistador" is now refigured as a "missionary" whose greatest desire is to reformulate the New World in the "image of God," that is, a Christian empire under the control of Spain. Imperialism is alive at the end of the tale, but in a transmuted, more politically beguiling, form.

Let us finally turn to the second question: What happens to the colonial project in the midst of these identity transformations? The contested site of cultural contact between discoverer and native refashions the whole design and function of the colonizing motive. Exchanges across the European and Native American boundary continue to challenge the European to find more effective means of colonization, methods that are equally powerful yet more comforting to his own conscience. Cultural contact disrupts Cabeza de Vaca's colonizing objective, but paradoxically reinforces it. No longer is he interested in using Christianity as a support system for enslaving the natives; instead, he chooses to see it as a tool for creating a community of believers. This evangelizing motive is not as physically violent as military conquest, but it still allows the colonizer to maintain authority over the indigenous population. He can thus preserve his colonialist relation to the

natives, but reduce his anxiety over holding that position.

Although colonial power and the construction of colonial discourse are not solely possessed by the colonizer, the native is not complicit in this conquest. As Homi Bhabha has successfully shown, "the knowledge" of the construction is what is denied from the colonized subject (Bhabha 1986, 165). The Other reshapes the colonizer into someone who simultaneously desires and resists them, but the colonizer controls the rhetoric of fear and the linguistic armaments of Christianity. Despite everything Cabeza de Vaca learns from the natives, he still maintains a certain ethnocentric and racist construction of "difference" (Christian vs. Pagan) because he can only understand what he learns through a language that constructs "knowledge" (of the Other) through categories of difference. Cabeza de Vaca acquires new knowledge about the natives, even a new way of thinking about them, but he continues to employ linguistic strategies that separate him from the natives. By making his strategies increasingly more visible in *La Relación*, a new ideology of conquest emerges, one so visible, it doesn't look like conquest, one so potentially violent, it actually looks peaceful.

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1. The myth of the American frontier is best exemplified by the work of Henry Nash Smith. Challenges to Smith's discussion of frontier mythology are numerous; see in particular, Jennings, Kolodny, Samuels, and Slotkin.

2. For the best overview of the hybridity scholarship, see Juan Bruce-Novoa. He explains that "some critics affirm the experience from a romantic point of view—that is, the reintegration of civilized man with nature—while others underscore the conflict the imputed conversion caused for ANCdV [Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca] when he returned to civilization" (9). For Bruce-Novoa, this problem of reintegration misses the point of the narrative; we should, instead, think of Cabeza de Vaca as a forerunner of the modern-day Chicano/a who lies in the middle of two cultures and does not fit neatly into a binary system of relations (18-9). As such, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative should be read as a "founding as well as a fundamental text of Chicano literature and culture" (4). For a similar discussion, see Pollard. For reintegrationist views, see Todorov and Molloy. Viewing colonial figures as forerunners of a nascent American self has precedent in the ground-breaking work of Sacvan Bercovitch in the mid- and late-70s. See, in particular, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. For a counterview, one that prefers to read colonial texts in their cultural context and not in terms of a broad literary tradition, see Zamora.

3. The first Spanish edition of *La Relación* was published in 1542 with the title *La relacion que dio Aluar nuñez cabeça de vaca de lo acaescido en las Indias en la armada donde yua por gouernador Páphilo de narbaez desde el año de veynte y siete hasta el año de treynta y seys que boluio a Seuilla con tres de su compañía*. The next Spanish edition was published in 1555. For this essay, I have used the first English translation by Buckingham Smith and all references in the essay come from this text. For other English translations, see Bandelier, Covey, Favata and Fernández, and Pupo-Walker and López-Morillas. For discussions of the problems of translation, see Smith (v-x), Favata and Fernández (19-20), and Adorno (1993, 78, note 2).

4. See Todorov 42-5. He argues that when European explorers adopt the assimilationist model of colonization—a desire to convert the Other to the values of their own culture—they must believe that the natives have certain qualities (values, beliefs, morals) that are amenable to Christianity.

5. For further discussion of the colonizer's efforts to control the means of communication, see Ashcroft, et al., Greenblatt (1990, 16-39) and Rabasa (187-215).

6. See John 11:1-46. The story, very briefly, is as follows. In the Gospel, John explains that Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus of their brother's illness. Jesus did not respond immediately to their summons; instead, he stayed in his present surroundings for two more days. When he arrived, Lazarus had died and had been, in fact, entombed for four days. Jesus knew that Lazarus was dead but told Martha that he would rise again if only she believed he was the "resurrection and the life." Martha said that she did believe that he was the "Messiah, the Son of God." A short time later, Jesus told the mourners at Lazarus' tomb to remove the stone from the entrance, and after a brief protest from Martha concerning the stench that would surely emanate from therein, they did what they were told. Jesus then called out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out! The dead man came out bound head and foot with linen strips, his faced wrapped in cloth. 'Untie him,' Jesus told them, 'and let him go free.'" The general parallels are fairly obvious: the local tribe, mourning the loss of one of their kinsmen, summoned Cabeza de Vaca for his aid. He blessed the dead man who later arose and walked away. Of course, the primary difference is that Jesus knows he has the power to raise someone from the dead; Cabeza de Vaca does not make this claim.

7. Typology is a crucial form of biblical hermeneutics in which Old Testament events are seen as "types," or prefigurements, of New Testament events, most centrally Christ's life and act of redemption. It was especially useful to the New

England Puritans who extended biblical typology to contemporary history: they believed events in the bible prefigured incidents in New England. On numerous occasions, Cabeza de Vaca describes his experiences as a test of his will (just as Jesus does in the desert) and frequently calls upon God to strengthen his ability to withstand "evil" (the customs of the local tribes). Jesus' spiritual trial is recorded in Matthew 4: 1-11. For further discussion of typology, see Bercovitch 1972.

**8.** Todorov makes this general point about discovery narratives, most especially in connection with Columbus (34-46).

**9.** See Adorno 1992 and 1994. In both articles, Adorno focuses on the impact Cabeza de Vaca's expedition had on subsequent conquests and the ways in which those further adventures created a model for peaceful conversion. My effort here is to unearth the politics of such "peaceful" conquests.

**10.** For further discussion of the ways in which cultural codes shape identity, see Greenblatt 1980, 1-9.

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Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (Spanish pronunciation: ['alβar 'nũɲeθ ka'βeθa ðe 'βaka]; Jerez de la Frontera, c. 1488/1490/1492 – Seville, c. 1557/1558/1559/1560) was a Spanish explorer of the New World, and one of four survivors of the 1527 Narváez expedition. During eight years of traveling across the US Southwest, he became a trader and faith healer to various Native American tribes before reconnecting with Spanish civilization in Mexico in 1536. After returning to Spain in 1537, he wrote an account Cabeza de Vaca combines ethnographic, geographic, and autobiographic details from *La Relación*, along with a filmic representation of the mystical beliefs, practices, and experiences of indigenous people and the deep personal faith of Cabeza de Vaca. According to Echevarria, the film is about "the depiction of a new man--who is not European, who is not Indian, who is right in the middle" (Della Flora HZ). Cabeza de Vaca wrote and published two works. The first, the *Relación* (also known as *Nafragios* or *Shipwrecks*), was published in 1542 and retells in harrowing detail the many ill-fated adventures that doomed the Narváez expedition to failure and the eventual death of all but four of the original crew of 500 men. While much of this attention has tended to focus on Cabeza de Vaca's unusual sympathy for Native Americans and the implicit argument that Spanish dominion will be better achieved by practicing a loving Christianity than by conquest, there is also a growing segment who see in the *Relación* the seeds of modern fiction in general and American literature in particular.

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (Spanish pronunciation: [ˈalβaˈka ðe βaka] (listen); Jerez de la Frontera, c. 1488/1490/1492 – Seville, c. 1557/1558/1559/1560) was a Spanish explorer of the New World, and one of four survivors of the 1527 Narváez expedition. During eight years of traveling across the US Southwest, he became a trader and faith healer to various Native American tribes before reconnecting with Spanish civilization in Mexico in 1536. After returning to Spain in 1537, he wrote an ethnographic empathy and the artifice of return in Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación*. Article (PDF Available) in *Colonial Latin American Review* 25(2):175-199 · April 2016 with 115 Reads. How we measure 'reads'. Cabeza de Vaca's journey is often mentioned as an example of an alternative conquest, one that appeals to modern liberal sensibilities, offering a not-so-bad genealogical origin for colonial Modernity. and the procurement of knowledge about the Other configure a new self, and finds in the text a shifting subject continuously moving from one self to another self, [ ] a persuasive and rarely authoritarian mediator moving between cultures with a clear and growing discomfort about his return, and for whom the others are not the Indians but.