

Cabeza de Vaca Invents the Road Novel

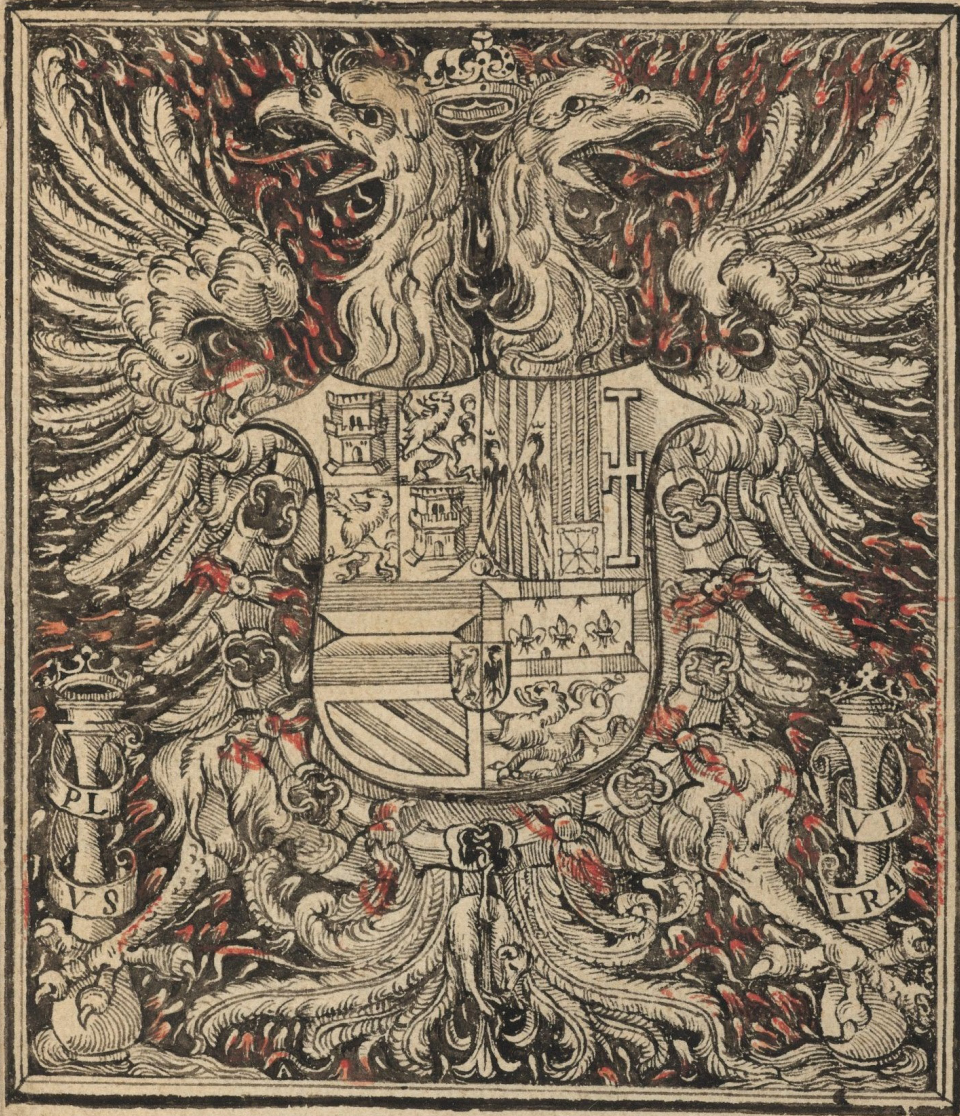
Ed Simon

WHEN YOU HEAR OF A sixteenth-century man named Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, what do you think that he may have looked like (while ignoring the literal Spanish translation of “Cow’s Head”)? Is it the name of a stolid Spanish hidalgo, descendant of those who battled Moors in Andalusia, hammer of the red-headed Guanche in the Canary Islands, and New World conquistador who brought crucifix and sword to the deserts of Mexico? Perhaps you envision the stereotypical conquistador of our collective colonial imagination, tall and tan, seated ramrod-straight on an Iberian stallion, with puffed steel armor emblazoned with a baroque family crest upon his chest, and the curved sharpness of a shining helmet atop his black-haired head. Clearly a *caballero* happy to willingly spread Christianity and unknowingly spread

small-pox all for the extraction of gold, to build a fortune in New Spain and to retire to Seville and write his memoirs.

Now, picture what a man named Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca would look like after eight years lost in the American wilderness, shipwrecked upon Galveston Island, after losing all of the accoutrements of “civilization” from which he derived his power, making a slow meander across the breadth of what would become Texas, into portions of northern Mexico, and then from New Mexico and Arizona back into those lands already claimed by Spain? How would such an ordeal have altered a man like Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, after he and three of his compatriots had to survive in the inhospitable deserts of the American southwest, sometimes treated by the indigenous tribes as slaves, and sometimes

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La relacion y comentarios del gouernador Aluár nuñez cabeça de vaca, de lo acaescido en las dos jornadas que hizo a las Indias.

Con priuilegio.

Esta cassada por los señores del consej o en Ochūa y cinco mrs.
& Valladolid. 1555.



Title page of *La relacion y comentarios del gouernador Aluár nuñez cabeça de vaca, de lo acaescido en las dos jornadas que hizo a las Indias* (1555), first published at Zamora, 1542. US 2415.3, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Public domain.

treated as powerful shamans? Can you see him straggling back into the fortifications of his countrymen after wandering for the better part of a decade, his black hair turned white, his ribs stretching emaciated stomach taut? What would that man's memoirs read like? As he wrote later, "This alone is what a man who came away naked could carry out with him."

Such is the actual account written by the real Cabeza de Vaca, and published in 1542 as *La relación y comentarios*, or *The Account and Commentaries* (sometimes known as *The Shipwreck and Commentaries*). One of the most remarkable narratives of the earliest decades of European colonization in the Americas, Cabeza de Vaca's book remains as strange, disquieting, hallucinatory, revelatory, and uncategorizable today as it was in the sixteenth-century. Writing in his popularized history *Brutal Journey: The Epic Story of the First Crossing of America*, Paul Schneider explains that Cabeza de Vaca's concern was the unforgiving kiln that was (and is) the American wilderness, in its sublimity, grandeur, horror, and awfulness. Such was that which could transform the survivors of the ill-fated Narváez expedition who crashed on the Gulf Coast into "killers and cannibals, torturers and torture victims, slavers and enslaved. They became faith healers, arms dealers, canoe thieves, spider eaters, and finally, when there were only the four of them left trudging across the high Texas desert, they became itinerant messiahs."

The material facts of what led to Cabeza de Vaca's eight years in the wild are as follows. In the summer of 1527, Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, charged Pánfilo de Narváez to set out from Hispaniola with an armada of five ships to explore the southern coast of what the Spanish called *La Florida*, roughly contiguous with what's the modern day southeastern United States. De Narváez was greatly trusted by the king—in 1510 he'd escorted

the Dominican friar Bartolomeo de las Casas through Cuba (the monk would later become a fierce advocate of the Indians, and he records the conquistador's cruelty in that regard) and in 1520 he'd been tasked with halting Hernan Cortez' invasion of the Aztec Empire, which hadn't been approved by the crown. He failed in that later task, but was still trusted enough by the Hapsburg monarch to attempt this exploration along the edge of the massive continent which lay to the north of Spanish possessions. In that capacity, Cabeza de Vaca was to function alongside Narváez as a marshal in the journey.

The Narváez expedition was particularly unlucky, as such travels go. Two ships were lost in a hurricane off the coast of Cuba before they even reached Florida (landing not far from present-day St. Petersburg). Half of Narváez' men, inspired by Indian legends of a golden city called "Apalachen" (from whence the mountain range gets its name), set off across land to find their treasure. The other half returned to their ships and sailed west along the Gulf Coast. Cabeza de Vaca commanded one of those ships, with Narváez as a passenger. At the mouth of the Mississippi the ship was to be blown off course in a violent storm, losing around ten men in the melee, including Narváez himself. The survivors washed up on Galveston Island in sight of Texas. By the end of their first shipwrecked winter, the number of men in the Narváez expedition had dwindled to fifteen. Sailing by raft to the Texas mainland, and their numbers would drop to four—a Salamancan named Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, another Castilian known as Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, an enslaved man named Estevancio who could be considered our history's first African-American man, and Cabeza de Vaca himself (in his narrative, the leader is separated briefly before being reunited with the other three).

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This, then, is where the main thrust of *The Account and Commentaries* begins, a shipwreck narrative (later known as a "Robinsonade" after Daniel DeFoe's eponymous eighteenth-century novel *Robinson Crusoe*) which quickly turns into a travelogue, while also containing elements of ethnography, the Gothic, the missionary tract, the conversion narrative, and the vision quest. From their arrival on the coast, the four surviving men of the Narváez expedition would venture deep into the North American continent itself, unequivocally the first non-Indians to do so, walking for the next eight years like the Israelites in the desert, until they'd once again reach New Spain's capital in Mexico. The mission found themselves as strangers in a strange land, inhabitants of a mystical space outside of traditional time, there in a country of "immense trees and open woods... [of] many lakes, great and small." Like Adam in Eden, Cabeza de Vaca gave names to what he found in the southwest, of "walnut and laurel... liquid amber, cedars, savins, evergreen, oaks, pines, red-oaks, and palmitos like those of Spain." Anticipating both the litanies of nineteenth-century naturalists, and the listing poems of Walt Whitman, Cabeza de Vaca provided a registry of American creatures, of "deer of three kinds, rabbits, hares, bears, lions and other wild beasts." There are "Birds... of various kinds. Geese in great numbers, Ducks, mallards, royal-ducks, fly-catchers, night-herons and partridges abound... falcons, gyrfalcons, sparrow-hawks, merlins, and numerous other fowl." For all of his outlining of fecundity, however, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative shouldn't be confused with

those paradisiacal accounts penned by colonists in South America, Virginia, and even in some cases in New England. The Texas desert is unforgiving. He wrote of "the poverty of the land" where it is the custom among its inhabitants that if "any one chance to fall sick in the desert, and cannot keep up with the rest, the Indians leave him to perish." Texas is less Eden than Gehenna, which is not incidental to Cabeza de Vaca's story of self-transformation. It's in the burning kiln of the desert that the men are stripped bare and made new.

In their journeys the men would be enslaved briefly by the Coahuiltecan and Karankawa, they'd live peacefully among other groups of Indians, and Cabeza de Vaca would develop knowledge of and sympathy for the indigenous of America, arguably becoming the first colonizer to "go native." Worth considering, especially in that connection, is in what sense Cabeza de Vaca can be considered an "American" writer, as he makes his journey across the Southwest. For Anglophone scholars and teachers of early American literature, Cabeza de Vaca's *Account and Commentaries* is too often shunted away, grouped along with other examples of the rich, multifaceted, complexity of nascent Chicano literature that is treated as perfunctory before the story of English colonization in the New World. When I was reading for my doctoral comprehensive examinations in early American literature, Cabeza de Vaca joined other luminaries of Spanish literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, from Inca Garcilaso de la Vega to Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, as mere prologue for the Massachusetts Puritans. Yet no less a personage than

Whitman would, in recognizing the three hundredth anniversary of Santé Fe in 1883, write that “Americans are yet to really learn our own antecedents... Thus far, impress’d by New England writers and schoolmasters, we tacitly abandon ourselves to the notion that our United States have been fashion’d from the British Islands only,” and, the good, grey poet adds, that belief “is a very great mistake.”

Not only is Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative crucially “American” in the expansive sense of the word which we use to include Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz alongside the colonial Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet, or to group Bartolomeo de las Casas along with Massachusetts governor John Winthrop, but it is also “American” in stylistic, thematic, generic, and symbolic senses as well. In short, *The Account and the Commentaries* is “American” not just because it was written about America, but because it tells a story about the enormity of the land, and how traversing the continent alters the voyagers, a veritably archetypal expression of a certain American ethos.

As Hispanicist Ilan Stavans writes in his introduction, “One of the reasons the narrative has become so popular” as of late is because of its conception of an “America” before there was an actual nation with that name, in that Cabeza de Vaca “distills a libertarian zest that erases differences by pushing its inhabitants to the limit.”

In this way, *The Account and Commentaries* is a “novel” about survival, about transformation, about being self-made. It expresses a distinctly American gnostic impulse. The four men became adept in indigenous medicine, and as they developed their own syncretistic fusion of Indian beliefs and Catholicism, they refashioned themselves into shamans celebrated as “children of the sun” by the southwestern tribes whom they encounter. Cabeza de Vaca and his men had no choice but to be partially assimilated into the tribes themselves;

their interaction among the Indians was like a counter-narrative of colonialism run in reverse. They adopted some Indian religious beliefs, altered Christian dictates to conform with indigenous religion, and learned about native medical practices. At some points, Cabeza de Vaca assists the groups that they live amongst in battles against warring tribes, and they aid their Indian protectors in evading Spanish slave catchers. Cabeza de Vaca’s enthusiasms for the Indians are sometimes marked, writing that “I believe these people see and hear better, and have keener sense than any other in the world. They are great in hunger, thirst, and cold, as if they were made for the endurance of these more than any other men, by habit and by nature.” And thus we witness the origins of a very American genre, with all of its difficulties and all that it is problematic about it, from the Indian captivity narratives of Puritan New England to Kevin Costner’s “noble savage” film *Dances with Wolves*, the apparently transformational story whereby a white man can pretend that he is an Indian. After all, if we can return to the conceit which started this essay, Cabeza de Vaca’s tale is one which presents the eight years which drained, emptied out, rebuilt, and transformed the conquering Spanish hidalgo into a self-made American shaman—a story with a profound and powerful change at its very center. Perhaps even more notably, what *The Account and Commentaries* arguably inaugurates is that most American of genres—the road novel.

Lawrence Buell writes in *The Dream of the Great American Novel* that “the richest single vein of New World writing during the colonial and early national prehistory of the novel’s emergence as an autonomous genre [was the] ... travel narrative.” In the taxonomy of themes which defines and differentiates American literature, the sheer scope of the continent’s size has marked

the road novel as a particularly American mode. From Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, to Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the sheer unforgiving scope and enormity of America has served as forge for personal transformation. And so Cabeza de Vaca's account of their voyages into Texas starts with unassuming minimalism, as the conquistador writes that "After another day the governor resolved to go inland to explore the country and see what was there... We took a northerly direction and at the hour of vespers reached a very large bay, which appeared to sweep far inland." Such is the beginning of Cabeza de Vaca's narrative, the remnant of the doomed Narváez expedition's eight-year sojourn in the wilderness.

Few things quite like it had been written before, justifying the audacious claim that it's the first of the road novels. Certainly, travelogues in this "Age of Discovery" had been written before, including the letters of Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci, as well as the venerable lineage of pilgrimage accounts. *The Account and Commentaries* differs from those earlier genres, however, in its approach to the issue of spatiality. In an account of a pilgrimage the ground is already well-trod, for that is the ritualistic import of the pilgrimage itself. Your feet are following the same trails as innumerable penitents before you, whether on the road to Rome, or Jerusalem, or Canterbury, or El Camino de Santiago. *The Account and Commentaries*, by contrast, presents a completely mysterious path, so that what we're reading account of is not the retreading of a ritualized itinerary, but the complete discovery of a new road. Stavans explains that in Cabeza de Vaca, the "sense of newness in the environment is patent in his voice at every turn."

One could argue that that's true of works by Columbus and Vespucci as well, but Cabeza de Vaca's story also differs from other New World writings composed during the

sixteenth-century as well, though. Crucially, Cabeza de Vaca and his compatriots, excluding the initial portion of the Narváez expedition, are entirely travelling overland. Unlike the nautical exploits of Columbus and Vespucci, who are privy to astrolabe and compass, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative concerns soil not water, land not sea. So obvious might this observation seem that it should barely need mentioning, except that the question of by what spatial metaphors "Americanness" is constructed, is not incidental. When the American strand was explored to the extent of only a few miles inland, "America" could be intellectually configured as largely absent, and the beaches that composed the extent of European knowledge of the new continents could be easily absorbed into a wider, trans-Atlantic understanding. With Cabeza de Vaca's abandonment of the shore, however, the focus changes from the oceanic to the continental. Suddenly America as a continent—in all of its vastness, its breadth, its enormity, and its unforgiving unknowingness—could become an operative metaphor for the New World. In *The Account and Commentaries*, it is the sheer massive mystery of the continent that becomes the dominant theme, for as Stavans writes, Cabeza de Vaca's narrative allowed readers to perceive America "as a virginial landscape, a place for experimentation." Thus, as in road novels from Kerouac's *On the Road* to Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (both of which retread some of the same space as Cabeza de Vaca) the external landscape becomes a catalyst for internal spiritual change.

What's also integral to the novelty of *The Account and Commentaries* is not just Cabeza de Vaca's movement overland, but the fact that neither he nor his compatriots are in any way in control of their own destiny. They have been stripped of their markers of supremacy, they have been reduced so as to make them something entirely new, and they

have ceased to be Europeans and instead become Americans. “In our reading from the perspective of the twenty-first century,” writes Stavans, Cabeza de Vaca “tells a tale of imposture and transformation, leading to a reexamination of our own ideas about cultural interaction.” For in the critic’s telling, the protagonists of the account “are anything but triumphant. They lose everything: their clothes, tools, horses, compatriots, and even their dignity. They wander about in a strange, unmapped land.” Yet in keeping with the strictures of the road narrative, such geographic movement into the unknown serves a potent spiritual purpose—as problematic as some of the rhetoric of Cabeza de Vaca may be, his account provides the inauguration of a particular type of American genre. Nowhere is this conflation of travel into the American continent configured as a means of personal growth more clearly articulated, than in the scenes where Cabeza de Vaca becomes “a shaman, and a hero to the natives,” as Stavans writes.

“The Indians wanted to make medicine men of us,” Cabeza de Vaca remembers, “because they cure diseases by breathing on the sick—and with that breath and their hands they drive their ailment away. So, they summoned us to do the same in order to be at least of some use.” Pressed into action, for the language betrays the basic impotence of the westerners (“in order to be at least of some use”) the Spanish are tasked with functioning within a distinctly native context, and while Cabeza de Vaca and the others attempted to promulgate Catholicism (even Estevancio, a convert from Islam), the numbers are clearly not with them. Cabeza de Vaca writes that “We laughed, taking it for a jest, and said that we did not understand how to cure.” What’s fascinating in the passage are the negotiations, both stated and implied, external and internal, that compel the Spanish unironically to act as medicine healers. “Seeing our obstinacy, an Indian told me that I did not know what I

said by claiming that what he knew was useless,” he writes. By virtue of his precarious position, Cabeza de Vaca is forced to confront a type of transcultural, epistemological empathy. Were he still the conqueror, he’d never have to consider that “I did not know what I said.” What makes the passage more complicated is that the Indians are actually asking the Spanish to enact a type of authority—but on Indian terms. The Indian tells Cabeza de Vaca that “stones and things growing out in the field have their virtues, and he, with a heated stone, placing on the stomach, could cure and take away pain.” Ultimately the four men “found ourselves in such stress as to have to do it”—unwilling shamans brought into a type of penitential medicine. “All the medicine man does is to make a few cuts where the pain is located, and then suck the skin around the incisions. They cauterize with fire, thinking it very effective,” and Cabeza de Vaca takes pains to emphasize, “and I found it to be so by own experience. Then they breathe on the spot where the pain is and believe that with this the disease goes away.” In this way Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca became a medicine man.

The passage is not without its complications. Cabeza de Vaca writes that part of the ritual which he and his compatriots invented involved not just those practices taught to them by the Indians, but also the making of “the sign of the cross while breathing on them,” the recitation of a paternoster and Ave Maria, and a prayer to the Lord for the “best we could to give them good health and inspire them.” It would be a mistake to read this as Cabeza de Vaca simply positing good religion against false magic, true faith against superstition, as shown by the language where he confirms the validity of some native practices. Such syncretism is in keeping with the policy of much of the ecclesiastical arm of Spain’s American conquests, particularly among Franciscans and Jesuits who encouraged a melding of

indigeneity and Catholicism, the better to effect conversion. Arguably, something else is going on in this passage as well, not just the creation of a new hybridized culture, but of Cabeza de Vaca being initiated into an entirely different worldview, a new perspective, consciousness, symbolic system.

Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov argued, in *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, that the Spanish were able to conquer the Aztec not just because of superior arms and microbes, but because the semiotic system in which the former was enmeshed—namely written language—facilitated a symbolic structure that made Spanish victory possible. Todorov claims that the Spanish and the Aztec structured their mental worlds with differing “sign systems,” differing ideologies of communication, whereby the later were situated in a complex web of transcendental, connotative, numinous, mythopoeic ways of seeing the world, but the former increasingly used a simple correspondence theory of truth, the better to militarily organize in the face of overwhelming odds. Writing of the Spanish, Todorov claims that they “are incontestably superior to the Indians in the realm of interhuman communication,” though his is not a simple claim of Eurocentric supremacy. To the contrary, “their victory is problematic, for there is not just one form of communication, one dimension of symbolic activity.” He worries, and warns, that “this victory from which we all derive, Europeans and Americans both, delivers as well a terrible blow to our capacity to feel in harmony with the world... The silence of the gods weighs upon the camp of the Europeans as much as on that of the Indians.”

The genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Americas meant not just the murder of millions of people, but also the extinction of singular, unique, different, visionary ways of perceiving the world. Yet in the example of Cabeza de Vaca, the Spanish shaman, we see

that the interaction of “sign systems,” to use Todorov’s phrase, doesn’t just mean extinction, for in the melding of European and Spanish ways of perceiving reality Cabeza de Vaca indicated an alternate conception of contact, a brief trace of an alternative history which didn’t come to pass. The sixteenth-century wasn’t marked by just the extinction of Indian folkways, but of their injection into the European hegemon itself. To focus only on the destruction of native culture (which of course has to be understood, recognized, and grieved) is to ironically deny Indian agency. It’s to merely make the indigenous passive observers to their own destruction. But in the example from the narrative of the Narváez expedition, there is the important reminder that Christian European culture could be, indeed had to be, converted in its own right. In the desert communion there was a way that Cabeza de Vaca could become a shaman, as surely as he could claim that he was converting Indians for Christ. We return to the earliest narratives of American colonization not out of triumphalism, but to find indications for a once present that never came to pass, to imagine alternative arrangements of what could have been, so as to better dream futures that have yet to pass.

Road narratives don’t just recount movement from point A to point B. They are not simply travelogues, nor are they the ritualized plot of the pilgrimage account. Rather, a road novel must exemplify the idea that in the travel towards a genuine unknown, there is a surrender whereby the traveler will be transformed by the lacunae of the landscape itself. From that transformation something new is to emerge. It’s arguably the most American of genres, neither European nor Indian, but rather born from the contact between the two somewhere in the forlorn desert. We are of the land, and the land itself is what forces that reinvention of the self, such as when Cabeza de Vaca became an American. A