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Diversity of Perspective in Cabeza De Vaca's "Relación" and Colonial Literature

Smith, Cassander L. "Beyond the Mediation: Esteban, Cabeza De Vaca's 'Relación', and a Narrative Negotiation." *Early American Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, pp. 267–291. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41705661.

Generally, early America is seen through the lens of the majority, of the colonizers who came from Europe. We have yet to discover original work such as poems or narratives from slaves that go further back than the 17th century. However, it doesn't mean that slaves didn't exist during the time period of early American colonization nor does it mean that because black Africans exist mostly as mentions in other people's narratives, that black Africans during early colonization are not historical figures. This is an idea that Smith keeps as a steady heartbeat within this article, always in the background. Smith warns against this idea of assuming the irrelevancy of black Africans in the account of this time period and she also warns against confining their existence to only tools that, as she puts it, "achieve a rhetorical and discursive goal" in the favor of the narrator—as if they were only plot devices in someone's imagination.

The focus of her essay is analyzing the journal of Cabeza De Vaca that retells his failure of an expedition and spotlights the existence of an African slave, Esteban, in the same narrative. She acknowledges the fact that Esteban is a mediated figure but pushes further and insists that Vaca's mediation of him is not a hinderance or an excuse to exclude Esteban from being an actual historical figure. She argues and attempts to prove that it is Esteban's very status as a historical figure and his real, incredibly vital, presence aids to not only create his portrayal in Cabeza de

Vaca's narrative but also alter it. She argues that Esteban achieves to flip the social norms of his time by changing status from slave to mediator and healer and reaping the benefits of that transformation—as demanded by their situation. As she describes it, his contribution as translator and middle man between the Spaniards and Native Americans is so detrimental that it forces Vaca to be inconsistent with how he writes about him. She points out that in some places of his journal Vaca refers to Esteban as outside of the main group that enjoys the benefits of being seen as god-like (aka the Spaniards) but then does the opposite in a different part of the narrative.

She argues that a work is not unattached to its surroundings or the environment in which it is written and it is this fluctuation of Cabeza de Vaca's portrayal of Esteban that reveals that the black African presence that he is mediating is one that existed beyond his imagination.

Riley, Carroll L. "Blacks in the Early Southwest." *Ethnohistory*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1972, pp. 247–260. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/480976.

While Smith argues for the legitimacy of Esteban as a historical figure, Riley aims to document Blacks in the Southwest and give comment on their actions, influence, and contributions. To do this, she starts by quoting where they are mentioned in other people's journals during this time period and what the documentation of black Africans means for the narrative that is the colonization of the early Southwest. Riley makes the important move of making account of blacks that hold a variety of statuses. She, of course, presents blacks who are slaves but she also presents blacks who were soldiers and interpreters and slaves who were given freedom. Among this pile of diverse existences is the subject of Smith's article—Esteban. Riley attributes him to being the first Black to set foot in the southwest. Riley and Smith both go over similar talking

points when it comes to Esteban such as: his position as a middleman and interpreter, his position as a “healer”, and his invoking of “magical powers” among the Native Americans. However, Riley’s presentation of him differs because she isn’t confined to just his interactions with Cabeza de Vaca and how he is presented in Vaca’s journal. Riley goes into another perspective of Esteban that is sourced from Father Marcos de Niza. The Marcos account gives great insight to what Esteban did as a mediator and healer—highlighting Esteban’s charm and confidence of self—but most prominently, it recounted Esteban’s death. After Marcos, Riley includes other versions of the death story that range from one year after the initial account to forty years after the fact.

Wade, Mariah. “Go-between: The Roles of Native American Women and Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in Southern Texas in the 16th Century.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 112, no. 445, 1999, pp. 332–342. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/541366.

In this article Wade brings attention to the idea of hybridity and applies it to Cabeza de Vaca and his roles while living among Native Americans as retold in “La Relacion”; Wade also puts it parallel to the roles of Native American women. In colonial studies hybridity, as Wade explains it, has most often served as a vehicle with which to look at how the process of colonization affects those who are being colonized. She notes that there are few documents that illustrate long-time situations where hybridity is seen being flipped—where the colonizer is seen being deeply affected by those who were intended to be the ones colonized; Vaca’s document is one of those rare documents.

She continues to define hybridity as the conjoining of “Sameness” and the quality of being the “Other” or “sameness with a difference”. She identifies that Vaca and the Americans see

the human condition (hunger, cold, and death) as sameness but anything to do with culture being different (such as language or clothing). As Wade focuses on Cabeza de Vaca's roles while he is living among the American tribes of Texas and puts it next to native women's roles she notes how this is a case of hybridity. He is a man but his roles are designated to be chores for women such as digging roots, fetching water, or gathering firewood. He speaks a language that is unintelligible and is useless as a warrior so he is pushed into being a healer—which is also a role occupied by mostly women in some tribes. When he becomes a trader, this is where his Sameness and Otherness truly marry and he is able to take advantage of his hybridity. As Wade puts it, he is Other enough to be enticing and cross group boundaries and since he isn't a warrior he isn't seen as a threat. However, he is Same enough to be able to know the American's trade patterns in harvesting and hunting, timing, make friends, and most importantly, trade information.

Wade relates to Riley in that she is insistent on expanding the scope in which the story of early colonization is told. Wade is not content with simply having only European voices in the scope of history but is compelled to tie in the presence of Native American women and explain how the addition of that perspective adds to the complexity of what is happening in "La Relación".

Interpretive Conclusion:

"La Relación" is an expedition report of a tragic happening. The trip from Florida to Texas was marred by infighting between the crew and commander, violent altercations between Native American groups, insufficient resource of food and water, and disease. This entire expedition seemed to be haunted by bad luck and death. The trip went from Spain to Florida to Texas;

an estimated six hundred people left Spain as a part of the expedition but by the time they reached Texas only two hundred remained. The surviving thirty three percent ate their horses and their fellow crewmen, deserted their ships, lost most of their possessions, and were dashed of the hopes for glory, fame and wealth that had originally motivated them to go to America.

This is a story about survivors and this is the setting in which we find Cabeza de Vaca during the narrative.

Smith and Wade would be able to easily converse about how Esteban and Vaca could both be seen to be exemplifying hybridity out of survival—how they are both stuck in two worlds albeit at different scopes and despite their respective subjects being a slave and the other the slave's master. Esteban is obviously talented in his own right, evidenced by how we can pick up languages and play as a mediator between his masters and a culture in which he has never experienced or interacted with before. He holds knowledge of two cultures and languages as the mediator and with that knowledge is power. Yet, even as he holds the fate of his masters in his skill and ability, he is still a slave who is owned by another person. He is still obliged, to an extent, to serve the purposes of the Spaniards. He is stuck between being the “same” as the Spaniards—garnishing the same respect and reverence that the Spaniards receive in the eyes of the Native Americans—but still being an Other in the realm of their four man group because the color of his skin is a quality that cannot be overlooked and it is a quality that makes him lesser.

Wade would be able to parallel that to how in a similar fashion, just as Esteban's invaluable skill is dismissible to the Spaniards because of his standing as a slave, Vaca's gender and the power it usually would reap is also dismissible on the fact that he is not a warrior. Vaca's sameness comes from that, as well as his performance of women's work and his “enjoyment of safe

conduct”. Yet, of course, he is still different. He is a man in women’s work. He speaks a different language and he looks different too—like Esteban. However, Wade might have a much more positive view of hybridity because, for Vaca, his hybridity is an advantage both ways. What made him the same, probably kept him alive because he wasn’t seen as a threat and therefore he could cross into different groups without being killed. His difference was also positive as it boosted his popularity as a trader because it created intrigue and brought people to him.

Riley and Smith would mostly likely talk about Esteban. They would probably theorize about what he might have been thinking as the expedition took a turn for the worst and people started dying left and right, how he was able to be a bridge for two cultures and what qualities it took to be such a thing, or why he didn’t just escape once he had enough knowledge of Native American passages and culture.

In a strange turn of events, each author plays relatively peacefully with each other’s content. They even all have a strong common theme that is buried within the three different arguments they make and could easily unite the trio: open-mindedness and diversity of narratives within the study of early American literature. Smith urges historians to remove the assumptions that those of African descent are not relevant in the story of early American or make the judgment that their representation is discounted in this time period because of the lack of primary sources from them. Riley makes a hopeful statement that perhaps through the advancement of archaeological work, ethnohistory, and ethnological work, the representation of Blacks in the history during the first encounters in the early Southwest of America will be expanded. Wade takes the concept of diversity of narratives and brings it to life in her dissection of a European narra-

tive to point out and invite into the conversation the perspective of Native American women and their roles in their society.

Colonization can easily be seen as cut and dry—that there's only two teams: the colonizers or the colonized, the Winner Team or the Loser Team. However, history isn't like that and because Cabeza de Vaca writes down how he survives in the Spaniard-Native American ecotone we get to see the diversity of narratives that converge in this one failed expedition. We are able to witness a slave have power over the lives of his masters, and we get to see a would-be colonizer make friends and coexists with those he aimed to colonize. And when we look deeper, we get to see black Africans existing in the early southwest and not just existing but affecting others in the area at that time. When it comes to diversity of narrative, for me, it is impossible to choose who is "more diverse". The three scholars presented have all brought important and creative perspectives to early colonial literature and they all inspire me to look at the primary text I initially read with a desire to look at it with a new angle. As Wade states: "Colonial texts are porous texts; they leak histories, orders, conversation, practices, and intentions" (Wade, 339). So, are there any clues to how perhaps the two other Spaniards felt about Esteban being on the "same" level as them? Who do I not "see" in the primary source that had to be there for that line to exist? Whose perspective have I not looked at yet?