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# Discursive Mapping: Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Thomas Jefferson's Construction of Selfhood and Otherness

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Discursive Mapping: Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and Thomas Jefferson's Construction of Selfhood and Otherness

The binary of savage versus civilized was deeply embedded in the structure of early American society and the consciousness of early generations of colonizers, codified through multiple methods of inscribing meaning upon native land. Thomas Jefferson, in his pseudo-scientific *Notes on the State of Virginia*, taxonomizes life in native America using maps, charts, and textual descriptions for the purpose of consolidating an American identity premised on superiority over native people and black slaves. In contrast, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca maps native America purely through language, constructing the illusory infallibility of European colonizers while crafting an overall narrative of native hyper-violence and susceptibility to subordination. I argue that Cabeza de Vaca and Jefferson share a first step in their map-making processes, beginning not with acts of creation, but acts of destruction. The foundation of their ideal colonial societies is genocide framed as the inexplicable diminishment of native populations. Such commonalities between Cabeza de Vaca and Jefferson's work bridge the temporal gap between them, expressing how certain aspects of colonization processes remain consistent over time. While Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca differently utilize pictorial and textual cartography, they both meticulously deepen colonization beyond physical conquest by othering native people and rousing a shared sense of selfhood among European colonizers.

Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca's texts act as historical evidence of Edward Said's theory of orientalism which posits that identity is formed through processes of othering. Said refers to

the discursive formation of the Orient (Asia, Africa, and the Middle East) and the Occident (North America and Western Europe), demonstrating how Western actors impose demonizing interpretations upon non-Western societies in order to assert their own superior identity. While not operating specifically from the model of Orient/Occident, Cabeza de Vaca and Jefferson both discursively construct a kind of indigenous Orient by defining their colonial societies in opposition to demonized native populations. This Orientalist discourse is shaped through overt colonization efforts, but also through banal Orientalism which embeds hegemonic binaries of superiority/inferiority in the mundane machinations of daily life. Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen revisit Edward Said's classic postcolonial text, centering "the degree to which Orientalism s (re)produced and negotiated in banal, bodily and sensuous practices," demystifying manifestations of colonialism that are diffused by but often subtler than formal, institutionalized discourses (Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen 174). This "practical orientalism" is exercised by both Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca, acting as a common strategy for establishing power (Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen 174).

In order to justify the occupation of native land by colonizers of European descent, Thomas Jefferson employs "linguistic violence" to erase native people from his discursive map of America (Looby 255). Looby presents an understanding of Jefferson's taxonomic classifications as inherently political and deeply implicated in native genocide. Jefferson refuses to engage with the histories and traditions of native people, claiming that "very little can now be discovered of the subsequent history of these tribes severally," allegedly because native people preserve information through speech rather than written records (Jefferson 102). He produces a blank sheet of paper on which to sketch the geography of America, obscuring any discourse that may conflict with his binaristic conceptualization of inferior native people and superior white

colonizers. Jefferson homogenizes native people as either uncivilized or entirely absent and colonizers as civilized and present, leaving no room for nuance. Jefferson's erasure of conflictual discourses occurs not just through the deletion of histories, but through the deletion of native people themselves, stating that "it is to be lamented then, very much to be lamented, that we have suffered so many of the Indian tribes already to extinguish," (Jefferson 107). By emphasizing the perception that native people have rapidly and thoroughly disappeared from their land, Jefferson creates imaginative space for the construction of a society in alignment with his own political vision.

Important to Jefferson's acts of linguistic violence is the way he situates himself outside the enactment of brutal atrocities. Jefferson frames the genocide of native people in passive terms, even suggesting that the deaths of native people are a disadvantage to himself and other colonizers. In fact, the murder of native populations benefits Jefferson's process of discursive mapping, and he actively participates in the project of literally and linguistically displacing native people from their ancestral land. Jefferson's failure to name the forces striving to "extinguish" native people operates both for the purpose of absolving colonizers of guilt and of creating a justifiable basis for a new society. If native people are naturally disappearing, then the philosophy of manifest destiny may easily be inserted into the discourse of early American society. The fiction underlying Jefferson's language is familiar: god's will and inexplicable forces of nature intervene to expunge native people from their land, therefore the occupation of newly-empty land by colonizers is a divinely accorded right and obligation.

Cabeza de Vaca's use of linguistic violence is characterized less by native erasure than by the invalidation of native lives and histories. Ramón Sánchez takes a critical purview of Cabeza de Vaca's discursive mapping practices as tools of domination, positing that "in his narrative

map, there appears to be no blank space – no silent space – for the landscape is designated in broad strokes as either tierra Cristiana or the non-tierra Cristiana,” unlike Jefferson’s narrative map, which relies heavily on the artificial formulation of blank space (Sánchez 41). Instead, Cabeza de Vaca’s production of a page on which to sketch his map is based largely on the delegitimization of native people’s claim to their land. Sánchez argues that Cabeza de Vaca constructs native land as “unrecognized space,” thus ensuring that “the Spanish conquest of their land and communities is justified,” while Jefferson constructs native land as empty space for justificatory purposes (Sánchez 30). Cabeza de Vaca reflects “it seems to me that it would be a very fruitful land if it were cultivated and peopled by civilized folk,” recognizing the presence of native people in the land he seeks to conquer, but criticizing the way they use that land (Cabeza de Vaca 65). While Jefferson erases the histories of native people by asserting that they are impossible to access, Cabeza de Vaca again exercises delegitimization in lieu of complete deletion. When Christian colonizers attempt to exert their missionizing influence, despite commonalities between the spirituality of Christians and native people, Cabeza de Vaca recalls that “we told them that we called the being they were speaking of God, and that they must call Him so and serve and adore Him as we commanded” (Cabeza de Vaca 118). The histories and customs of native people may appear to be allowed space in Cabeza de Vaca’s map, but they are ultimately superimposed by the histories and customs of Christian colonizers, foregrounding a binary of inferiority and superiority.

While a major component of Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca’s discursive maps is colonizers’ literal traversal and conquest of space, seemingly innocuous actions effectively weave Orientalist binaries of inferiority and superiority into the fabric of their early societies. These authors clear space for themselves so that they may repopulate native land with colonial

bodies as well as colonial texts and worldviews. Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen highlight the component of Said's theory that describes Orientalism as "centrally performed, practised and (re)negotiated in daily life," not just through institutional practices (Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen 175). Colonialism, in this analysis, is abstract and material, normalized within formal institutional structures through the complete saturation of social life with value-laden, binaristic logic.

An overarching binary of superiority/inferiority is reinforced by symbolic manifestations of social norms and institutional patterns. As Cabeza de Vaca negotiates native space, Sánchez observes that "the indigenous signs and symbols are seen as demarcating a land and indicating the Spaniards have trespassed into an indio place," thus prompting him to reinterpret his mission "by re-conceptualizing and making the space meaningful in terms of his ideological framework" (Sánchez 40). This analysis harmonizes with Haldrup, Koefoed, and Simonsen's concept of banal Orientalism, as symbols are recognized as pervasive, powerful forces working to establish competing ideologies as legitimate and superior. Colonial texts are further implanted in discursively emptied native space as colonial bodies emphasize their messages through symbolic acts. Looby refers to Jefferson's investment in establishing an "all-encompassing conceptual system," drawing attention to Jefferson's need to assert the superiority of colonizers at all levels of existence, both banal and institutional (Looby 267). These theoretical emphases on the strength of commonplace actions and constructs open up Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca's texts to readings for discursive mapping.

The structure of *Notes on the State of Virginia* embodies banal Orientalism, dehumanizing native people for the purpose of establishing their inferiority in juxtaposition to colonizers' superiority. After several detailed charts categorizing animals commonly found in

Virginia, Jefferson enters into a generalized description of native people and eventually draws a chart taxonomizing native tribes. He begins his discussion of native people by stating that “I can speak of him somewhat from my own knowledge, but more from the information of others better acquainted with him,” expressing comfort with assuming an authoritative stance on native cultures despite acknowledged ignorance (Jefferson 63). While this decision to dismiss his own lack of familiarity with native people is deeply rooted in colonialist thought, of particular significance are the location and structure of Jefferson’s depictions of native people. Jefferson’s placement of information about native people immediately following information about indigenous plants and animals implies a degree of continuity between native non-human species and native people. Jefferson’s chart of native tribes also closely resembles his charts of plants and animals, further suggesting that Jefferson regards native people as animalistic. The structure of *Notes on the State of Virginia* functions as a manifestation of banal Orientalism, coding native people as uncivilized and inferior.

Cabeza de Vaca participates in various behaviors throughout his time in native America which reflect Orientalist strategies and goals. The discourse map constructed by Cabeza de Vaca is heavily influenced by religious symbolism, as he seeks to assert the superiority of Christian colonizers through daily behaviors even when he is destitute and can access very little institutional support. He describes his assumption of a medical role, recounting that “the way in which we cured was by making the sign of the cross over them,” invoking images of Christian colonizers dispersing their ideologies through daily, seemingly unremarkable practices (Cabeza de Vaca 49). Cabeza de Vaca’s navigation of native land is fraught with challenges that eliminate some of his material privileges, so he must “speak from the margins in the manifest expectation of having an impact at the center,” imposing religion on native people in his day-to-day travels

with the hope that his eventual recovery of access to the church will solidify his attempts to establish authority (Vargas 15). Cabeza de Vaca's infliction of religious symbolism on native people and lands implies a remapping of native customs, demonstrating that his delegitimization of native people's claims to their land fully pervades each level of his consciousness and his behavior.

Cabeza de Vaca faces difficulties in establishing the side of an Orientalist binary that proclaims the superiority of the colonizer. Vargas argues that Cabeza de Vaca constantly works to negotiate "the tension between failure and the urge to re-imagine that failure as a promise," creatively framing challenges to the creation of colonial authority as hard-fought triumphs (Vargas 4). This casting of failure in terms of success is in part a function of Cabeza de Vaca's investment in impressing a royal audience, but it also represents his intention to map all native lands as potentially conquerable, regardless of extenuating circumstances faced by colonizers. While Cabeza de Vaca's struggles force him to civilly interact with native people, "despite Cabeza de Vaca's . . . largely sympathetic descriptions of the people of the lands he traverses, the spirit of conquest guides his text" and the effort to stratify native inferiority and Christian superiority is omnipresent (Vargas 9). To the best of his abilities, Cabeza de Vaca diminishes the worth of native people even as he depends upon them for his survival. He and his fellow Christians constantly take "as guides those whom we had captured," demanding that native people guarantee their safe passage through native lands and ultimately attributing their security to God (Cabeza de Vaca 19). Manifest destiny materializes in *Castaways*, as Cabeza de Vaca draws a map of native America riddled with Christian symbolism and commissioned by divine authority. Spanish colonizers are thus portrayed by Cabeza de Vaca as legitimate, superior



claimants to native land, while native people are portrayed as inferior and their claims to land are delegitimized.

While the practices involved in banal Orientalism are prominent in both Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca's texts, *Notes on the State of Virginia* is unique in that it includes pictorial maps as well as textual ones. Jefferson draws a depiction of a river in which "arrows show where it descends or ascends," laying claim to authority over the direction of water flow (Jefferson 24). Despite flaws or biases in Jefferson's work, he frames his overall discursive map in scientific terms, implicitly arguing that his taxonomies and drawings of river currents are objective truths. Jefferson's pictorial maps are infused with this tone, and his alleged omniscience resembles religious authority, making his drawing of a river not merely a drawing, but a living text. Jefferson's sketches are seizures of knowledge, power, and land condoned by God. Just as Jefferson's taxonomic charts are rife with rhetorical contributions to the binaristic construction of native inferiority and colonial superiority, his maps are representative of ambitions that contradict his pretense of objectivity. Because Jefferson is working from the basic assumption that native lands are empty, his drawings and taxonomies of those lands are posited as pioneering, and each detail described therein is assimilated into his colonial vision.

Jefferson and Cabeza de Vaca's consolidation of people into rigid categories serves to promote cohesion in their newly-established societies. Looby argues that Jefferson's greatest obstacle was that "too many kinds of cultural heterogeneity stood in the way of establishing an integral national self," so he wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* in an effort to homogenize the colonial population (Jefferson 260). Jefferson's ultimate goal in constructing a binary of self and other is to subsume all intended members of his superior society under the label of self and instill in them an interest in violently asserting the inferiority of those perceived as other. Jefferson's

Orientalist project is born out of a “reactionary anxiety” in response to his fear of native revolt and created for the purpose of stabilizing colonial America (Looby 264). His taxonomies and maps claim objectivity and reflect a “strong prejudice in favor of the identical, the persisting, the solid” because Jefferson hopes that American society will similarly claim unquestionable legitimacy and permanence (Looby 263).

While Jefferson sought to create a society separate from that of Britain, Cabeza de Vaca’s objective was to supplement and maintain loyalty to Spain. Jefferson’s investment in establishing stability in colonial society is therefore more pronounced than Cabeza de Vaca’s, but concern for ensuring social cohesion is still present in *Castaways*. Cabeza de Vaca’s stated purpose in embarking on a journey to native America is to “conquer those lands and bring them to the knowledge of the truth Faith and the true lordship and service of Your Majesty,” affirming his commitment to Spain (Cabeza de Vaca 4). His diction mirrors Jefferson’s assertion of objectivity, as he refers to “true” faith and lordship, thus delegitimizing any form of faith or lordship that differs from Christianity and Spanish government. Cabeza de Vaca’s colonial project is not just one that seeks to bring the Christian faith and Spanish crown to native people, but one that seeks to reinforce Spanish Christians’ belief in the superiority of their own ideologies. Vargas portrays *Castaways* as a living text that performs crucial operations for the Spanish colonial mission, becoming “the material manifestation of the expedition itself: the text becomes the prize of the expedition,” demonstrating the potential for Spanish Christians to survive in, conquer, and extend their society to native lands (Vargas 3). In order for Spanish Christian ideology to be disseminated in a non-European land, members of Spanish society must first fully believe that their ideologies are “true”. Throughout *Castaways*, Cabeza de Vaca asserts and reasserts the supremacy of Christianity and Spanish governance through explicit statements,

symbolic acts, and by interpreting his mission as successful despite significant struggle. This allows Spanish Christians to read Cabeza de Vaca's narrative as one that fulfills the Orientalist fantasy of colonial superiority, thus establishing a foundation for a colonial society premised on the confidence of its members in the legitimacy of their state.

Vargas' understanding of *Castaways* as a living text that fulfills a social role and serves as an active tool of empire is useful to analysis of Jefferson's text as well as Cabeza de Vaca's. Lee Dowling takes a similar stance to Vargas in suggesting that *Castaways* "is, in a sense, more than fiction" and instead represents the inerrancy of Christian Spanish ideologies and people (Dowling 97). In order for infallibility to be established, blamelessness for any shortcomings must first be absolved, and Cabeza de Vaca implies that he "himself was blameless in making the unwise decisions that resulted in the expedition's failure" (Dowling 36-37). Jefferson absolves himself of blame for any failures by commending the potential of American society, speculating that "we therefore have reason to believe she can produce her full quota of genius" and making *Notes on the State of Virginia* a testament to the future intellectual greatness of colonial America (Jefferson 70). Neither *Notes on the State of Virginia* nor *Castaways* is merely a text; both of these works are intended to be exhibits of the vast potential of American and colonial Spanish societies in an intellectual and in a physical sense.

While *Castaways* and *Notes on the State of Virginia* serve similar purposes in their authors' colonizing missions and utilize similar strategies in their processes of discursive mapping, their vastly different temporal and social locations warrant further comment. Thomas Jefferson centers concern for the creation of a functional society to a greater extent than does Cabeza de Vaca, as Cabeza de Vaca is able to rely upon the translation of Spain's preexisting stability into colonial Spanish-American society. Jefferson's belief that "the only kind of society

that had any chance to forestall the process of corruption was one that was conflict-free” underlies each step of his discursive mapping process as he attempts to homogenize American colonists to a point at which all ideological difference is eliminated (Jefferson 264). The work of eliminating ideological difference is mostly completed prior to Cabeza de Vaca’s arrival in native American lands, as Spanish historical and current governmental figures already consolidated a cohesive Spanish identity. The necessity of establishing an entirely new form of cultural hegemony collides with contemporary intellectual focus on rationality for Jefferson, prompting his use of objective, scientific language and tone. Cabeza de Vaca’s temporal situation is more consistent with a strong emphasis on religion, which is evident in *Castaways* as he uses the language of religious authority rather than scientific objectivity. While Jefferson uses science and Cabeza de Vaca uses religion, these emphases serve the same purpose: to assert unquestionable domination of their societies over discourse. The most notable divergence between the texts is the age and stability of the societal structures they exemplify and serve.

Cabeza de Vaca and Jefferson, through discursive mapping, erase and invalidate indigenous inhabitants of the lands they violate and conquer to create space for an all-encompassing theoretical and material system of colonial dominance. Discursive mapping operates on a number of levels in *Castaways* and *Notes on the State of Virginia*. In *Castaways*, Cabeza de Vaca solely uses text to engage in cartography and construct himself as civilized and native people as savage others. Jefferson uses visual cartography, textual mapping, and taxonomic charts to construct the aforementioned binary. These authors colonize through physical acts but also through the production of knowledge that takes place when they write meanings and values onto native lands and people, attempting to justify their acts by constructing all native entities as savage. Their efforts to consolidate a binary of savage versus civilized

reflect anxiety surrounding the maintenance of power and legitimacy. As selfhood in both *Castaways* and *Notes on the State of Virginia* is constructed in opposition to identities violently imposed upon the other, the national identities endorsed by the authors are inescapably barbarous.

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