

**EARLY VISIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICA:
ÁLVAR NÚÑEZ CABEZA DE VACA'S 'NAUFRAGIOS'
AND WILLIAM BRADFORD'S 'OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION'**

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This book intrigues from the start. The varying ways in which early European explorers and colonizers have viewed and portrayed what was to them a New World have fascinated scholars and general readers ever since Columbus wrote his first reports. A multitude of historians, historical geographers, anthropologists and literary analysts have studied the circumstances, motives, aims, and forms in which generations of Europeans from 1492 onwards expressed their experiences in, and impressions of, American lands and peoples.¹ The general fascination with human ‘otherness’ is as old as humankind itself, but in scholarly circles the representation of alterity as a mirror revealing self and self-image is of special interest. In this book, Carmen Gómez Galisteo’s main focus is on the cultural contexts of two early sources, one Spanish and one English, and on the different historiographical values placed on them by their contemporaries and by later scholars. Her overall aim is to offer a comparative case study of two very different but equally compelling first-hand narratives of early North America. Her starting point is clearly stated: “My hypothesis upon tackling these two works is that, despite the perceived abysm between the Spanish and English colonization of the Americas, Cabeza de Vaca and Bradford participated of a common repository of ideas” (ix).

It immediately strikes one that the author has made an odd choice for a comparative study. It is true that Cabeza de Vaca and Bradford were both Europeans, and therefore, in very broad terms, shared a common cultural background. They both

went to North America in the early modern era, spent a good number of years there, and wrote substantial narratives about their experiences. These commonalities afford some scope to feed into wide-ranging studies of early modern European expansion in the Americas, and of the literature pertaining to both physical and cultural trans-Atlantic crossings. This study, however, finds few similarities between the two writers and their works, actually underscoring many deeply significant differences of time, country of origin, religion, language, education and other cultural specificities, motives for going to America, places of destination, aims, means, activities and results, as well as the multiple differences regarding their respective narratives, such as genre and style, their authors' purposes in writing, and the reception of those narratives by their contemporaries and later historians.

Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (c.1488-c.1559) was the treasurer of the early sixteenth-century expedition led by Pánfilo de Narváez to Florida and southeastern North America. Of the 300 men that Narváez assigned to the land expedition in 1528, all died or disappeared except Cabeza de Vaca, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and a black man called Estebanico. The four men managed to survive as slaves, traders and shamanic healers, encountering many different native peoples in the course of an epic eight-year journey to the Pacific coast of New Spain. Cabeza de Vaca, who was not a cultivated man, doubtless had several reasons for writing his story (which was published in 1542), but uppermost in his mind seems to have been his hope that it would gain him royal favour and an appointment as leader of another expedition which might bring him greater success than Narváez's ill-fated 'entrada'. Needing to give an explanation for Narváez's massive failure and for his own suffering and survival, Cabeza de Vaca offers divine intervention and providence as the vital key to understanding and giving special value to his personal story.

William Bradford (c.1590-c.1657), by contrast, was an educated man. He was a political and religious leader of the Separatist Puritan community that founded Plymouth in New England in 1620. He wrote the story of that community's experiences between 1621 and 1646 from the perspective of a historian rather than that of a protagonist and eye-witness. By all accounts, he minimized, indeed almost concealed his own role in the story, in order to explain, for the benefit of future generations, the ways in which he thought divine providence guided the Pilgrims' venture. Perhaps he also wanted to establish Plymouth's place in history, in view of the Great Puritan migration of the 1630s to Massachusetts and neighbouring New England colonies, and possibly too, to assuage a certain personal disappointment at his community's fast-fading religious fervour. Bradford wrote his history of Plymouth Plantation between 1630 and 1651. It was known to his contemporaries, who apparently consulted it in manuscript form, but it was

lost some time during the US war of independence and not published until 1856.

Early Visions and Representations of America is divided into six chapters. An introductory survey of the historical background of European expansion and the literary problems involved in writing about the New World sets the stage. In addition to underscoring the importance of the different roles of divine providence, the author's main focus here revolves around the idea that the exploration and colonization of America contributed greatly to the formation of both Spanish and English national identities. Gómez Galisteo repeatedly affirms this link but does not fully clarify her theory of how it worked. She does offer a selection of interesting quotations from early modern sources as examples of Spanish or English opinions and sentiments concerning America, but the discussion is muddled by her tendency to move from exemplification to generalization about "national" attitudes. New England Puritan writers were Englishmen, to be sure, but not all Englishmen were New England Puritans.

This is followed by a description of the "competing visions of America" given, on the one hand, by eyewitnesses, that is, individuals who had first-hand knowledge and experience of North America, and on the other, by historians who wrote accounts based on a variety of sources that might include protagonists' letters, reports and narrations. The author does offer some evidence and explanation of a coetaneous sense of the difference between the two kinds of accounts, but, by setting these two categories in opposition, this chapter oversimplifies the deeper issues involved in ascertaining truth and credibility in primary and secondary sources. Professional historians today understand that both primary and secondary sources reflect their author's motives, aims and sources, and that all texts require careful evaluation, irrespective of whether they were penned by protagonists and eyewitnesses or by historians. Gómez-Galisteo's affirmation that early modern contemporaries viewed narratives written by historians as being more highly regarded or more authoritative than eyewitness versions is not substantiated well enough for such a broad generalization, but it is provocative and might feed into the existing debate about the historical credibility of texts shaping early European perceptions of America.

The third chapter, entitled "Describing an Unknown Land", does a good job of explaining the multiple difficulties found by European writers who faced the task of trying to describe American lands and peoples to their contemporaries. Chapters four and five discuss in some detail the images of America created by Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in *Naufragios* and by William Bradford in his work, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, respectively. In chapter six, Gómez-Galisteo revisits aspects of chapter two in her analysis of Cabeza de Vaca and Bradford as both eyewitnesses and

historians. The discussion offers a useful description of the reactions of a few contemporaries and later historians, but is marred by the author's seemingly unquestioning acceptance of favourable evaluations of Bradford and negative evaluations of Cabeza de Vaca, without actually analyzing the sources or explaining her own reasons. The study repeatedly asserts that Bradford's veracity and prestige are not questioned and that Cabeza de Vaca is not considered serious, reliable or authoritative as a historical source (153, 155, 157-158, 169).

The overwhelming majority of US sources cited in the bibliography reflects the fact that American historiography far outstrips Spanish scholarship on these subjects, at least in quantity, and shows due diligence on Gómez-Galisteo's part. Nonetheless, Spanish-language sources are underrepresented, and of those cited only a handful of contributions are by Spanish scholars.² This seems especially disappointing in a work by a Spanish author who decries the fact that Spanish texts about North American history have long been marginalized or even ignored by US scholars. The notes are not particularly helpful. The publisher may have imposed their annoying placement at the end of each chapter, but the main problem lies in the composite lists of sources for entire paragraphs that make it almost impossible for readers to evaluate the relation between content and sources cited. At the very least, specific textual quotations should have their own individual notes identifying the precise source. There is no quibble with second-hand quotes, as long as they are properly credited, but examples like the one on page 162, note 4: "Barrera, quoted in James C. Murray" are unacceptable because "Barrera" is nowhere to be found in the alphabetical listing of the end bibliography. Trinidad Barrera's edition of *Naufragios* is included in the bibliography under Cabeza de Vaca, while other editions are cited under the names of the editors and/or in the list of secondary sources; but then again, Murray might have been citing another piece by Barrera not cited in this book.³

Gómez-Galisteo concludes with a call for more multinational perspectives in order to correct excessively nationalistic approaches to "colonial studies" (171). Unfortunately, her comparison of Cabeza de Vaca and Bradford points out many more differences than similarities, losing sight of the common cultural roots and circumstances of European geographical exploration and colonial expansion across the Atlantic and in the Americas.

Notes

¹. See for example Chiappelli (1976), Elliott (1992), Bushnell (1995), Kupperman (1995), Abellán (2009).

². Among the most notable absences are Piqueras Céspedes (1990 and 1998).

³. For example, Barrera López. (1986).

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