

# FORUM

*The Forum is intended to promote dialogue by providing space for shorter pieces of writing including opinions and suggestions, brief responses to papers, reports of research in progress, meditations, and descriptions of pedagogical strategies.*

## To Know the Other

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A few days ago I was talking to an administrator and asked how her meeting with the Irvine Foundation went. The college was in the process of applying for a large diversity grant, and as part of the proposal we had incorporated monies to help fund a new off-campus program in Mexico for our students. When the Irvine people saw this they seemed puzzled and wanted to know how a program abroad would help with diversity issues *on* campus. As my friend related this to me she asked, “So, how would *you* address this concern?” As a foreign language teacher, the answer came to me immediately: when our students go abroad to live and study with peoples from other countries and cultures, they confront diversity on a daily basis. Most importantly, however, they become — for the first time in many of their lives — “the other.” As such, they begin to understand what it means to be a member of a minority, and thus become more sensitive and empathetic to those who are different, qualities they bring back to campus with them when they return.

I’ve been thinking a lot about “the other” recently. My current

research involves Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his evolving view of the Indian. A typical 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish conquistador in search of gold and glory, Cabeza de Vaca's story is anything but typical. It is, in fact, a remarkable adventure unequalled in the history of the New World. Forming part of the ill-fated 1527 expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez, Cabeza de Vaca found himself shipwrecked off the coast of Florida. Struggling to survive in a hostile environment, and under conditions of desperate need, the original group of six hundred men was soon reduced to just four. *La Relación* ("The Account") — also known as *Naufragios* ("Shipwrecks")<sup>1</sup> — narrates Cabeza de Vaca's decade-long adventure in the New World, culminating with his amazing pilgrimage westward through the wide expanses of present-day Texas to the Sea of Cortes, and then south to Mexico City. This journey made him and his three companions the first non-Indians to cross the North American continent on foot. Cabeza de Vaca survived by living among the Indians, first as slave, then as trader, and finally as "healer." The experience turned him into one of the first — and most passionate — advocates for Native American rights.

*La Relación* is valuable for historians, literary scholars, ethnographers, and anthropologists. It offers, for example, the first reported sightings of the buffalo, as well as the first descriptions of the Mississippi River and the southern regions and peoples of the present-day United States. What interests me most, however, is how Cabeza de Vaca's image of the other — in this case Native Americans — is directly affected by his own self-perception, and how this evolves during his journey. In other words, his changing vision has less to do with the Indians' treatment of him or with exterior circumstances (which varied considerably), but rather with a transformation *within* the chronicler himself. Initially, for example, the "conquistador" perceives the Indians as "brutes" and "savages" to be dominated, exploited, and abused by the Spaniards, whose cruel actions are justified by the rules of conquest. Soon, however, Cabeza de Vaca's identity becomes redefined. In his daily struggle to survive, he loses the very clothes on his back, and symbolically along with them, his ethnocentrism. At this point, not only does the mythical conqueror become humanized, but traditional divisions are erased: the concepts of "hero" and "savage" are eventually replaced by the concept "human."<sup>2</sup> As he concludes his pilgrimage, Cabeza de Vaca, the "healer," seeks to restore the Indians' physical and spiritual health, to bring them to God through peaceful means, and to protect them from the abuse of the Spaniards, who, in an ironic twist, are painted as the

true “barbarians” at the end of the narrative.

By the end of his journey, Cabeza de Vaca has changed dramatically. He has lived among the Indians for almost a decade, gaining their respect and admiration, calling them brother and friend. The long odyssey of Cabeza de Vaca proves to be a transformative spiritual journey of self-discovery, a journey that allows him to know — and love — the other more authentically.

What are this story’s implications for us in the foreign language classroom? The first day of class, I always ask my students to consider what it means to be a Christian and study a foreign language, literature, or culture. Specifically, I invite them to think about how this course will help them to grow in Christ and to love others more fully. After a spirited discussion (or, more honestly, a painfully long silence!), I like to read a quote from Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America*. Referring to the early priests who came to the New World to protect the Indians from Spanish abuse, he asks:

Can we really love someone if we know little or nothing of his identity; if we see, in place of that identity, a projection of ourselves or of our ideals? We know that such a thing is quite possible, even frequent, in personal relations; but what happens in cultural confrontations? Doesn’t one culture risk trying to transform the other in its own name, and therefore risk subjugating it as well? How much is such love worth?<sup>3</sup>

Todorov reminds us that without true understanding, true love cannot exist. If we see others as merely a mirror of ourselves, we run the risk of assimilationism, of unconsciously projecting our own values on them. But if we assume difference, it is tempting to dichotomize into terms of superiority and inferiority (and it is usually the others who remain inferior). The trick is to see someone as truly *other*, and not as an imperfect version of ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Helping our students achieve this, is, in my opinion, perhaps the most exciting responsibility we have as Christian foreign language and literature professors. Indeed, the engagement with the other, with those who are different from us, is foundational to our discipline and is one of the reasons why modern languages have classically formed part of a liberal arts

curriculum. Language is connection; it implies dialogue, a relationship, communion with the other. As we teach our students to communicate more authentically with people unlike them, we encourage them to begin the journey with us. Along the way we strive to give them the skills to approach others respectfully, without vilifying or romanticizing, and to affirm the other as another person created in God's image. As our students leave our campuses and study abroad, we prepare them to enter the others' world graciously, not as their superiors, but as their peers; not as those who have all the answers, but as those willing to ask the questions necessary to learn from them. Finally, we hope our students, like Cabeza de Vaca, will keep themselves open to change within themselves, so that ultimately, as he did, they may achieve a more perfect love of the other.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Written upon his return to Spain between 1537 and 1540, *La Relación* was first published in Zamora in 1542. A second edition (with only minor alterations) was published in Valladolid in 1555, along with the chronicler's *Comentarios*, which recorded his subsequent misadventures as governor of the Río de la Plata provinces in South America.

<sup>2</sup> See Beatriz Pastor Bodmer, *The Armature of Conquest* (Stanford: Stanford U Press, 1992), pp. 137-42.

<sup>3</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.