

Bridging Historias – Teaching Origins of Hispanic Peoples in the Americas “On Being Foreign”

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Objectives: Students will examine the concept of “foreignness” through selected excerpts of Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación*, and will make comparisons and connections with present day ideas of foreignness in the United States.

1. Warm-up (10 minutes): Students reflect about their own experience of foreignness by writing and sharing with the group situations in which they, or others they know, **have felt “foreign” or being treated as such**. Each participant writes a few sentences that:

- describe the situation briefly,
- describe something that **she/he perceived** as odd, strange or “foreign” in that situation, and/or
- describe how **she/he was perceived** as odd, strange or foreign in that situation.

These experiences will be shared in a whole group discussion, making note of definitions and connotations of “foreignness.” Instructor may project definitions from an online dictionary and examine them briefly with students. In particular: “Not natural; alien,” “Situated in an abnormal or improper place in the body and typically introduced from outside,” and “Not germane; irrelevant.”

2. Context for *Relación*. Elicited from students (“What do you know about Cabeza de Vaca, the time in which he lived, and his journey?”). [Context building may be part of students’ homework. The instructor’s role then would be to provide any relevant information that is missing and visual aides. Visual aides for this part of the class: portrait of Cabeza de Vaca, map of his journey, Spanish 16th century painting of the Spanish “conquest” of America] **(10 minutes)**

3. The dynamic of foreignness in *Relación* (30 minutes).

- A. Students identify common ideas associated with “natives” and “conquistadores” or “colonizers” (newcomers) – instructor writes on board. To this end, students match the following nouns with either “natives” or “newcomers”: Cannibalism, nakedness, superstition, land exploitation, slavery.
- B. The group is divided in two or more small groups (depending on the size of the whole group). Each group receives two excerpts of *Relación*. Group members read and analyze the excerpts in terms of the experience of foreignness that they depict: “Who is considered foreign in this excerpt? How do you know? Who has the authority or holds the power in those excerpts? Is the quality of being foreign a positive or a negative one in those excerpts?” etc.

- C. The whole group discusses their findings. To aid the discussion, instructor projects the same Spanish 16th century painting of the Spanish “conquest” shown before, a short trailer of the film “Cabeza de Vaca” (1991) and an image of an Aztec drawing depicting Spaniards at the time of their arrival in Mexico. Instructor asks: “Which of these representations is more predominant in the *Relación*? What does that say about who gets to tell the story/History? What are the consequences of having this one-sided narrative?”

4. Connecting

Each student writes a short description of Spaniards from the point of view of the natives.

5. Concluding

Whole Group Discussion: Does Cabeza de Vaca’s story teach us any lessons about:

- The relativity of ideas about who is foreign? The reasons one group may label another group as “foreign”?
- The importance of being able to tell your own story in your own words? The consequences of not being able to tell your own story?

1770 Map of Rio Grande Delta



Indian villages, or rancherías, are shown dotting the landscape near the Rio Grande delta and up the coast in this ca. 1720s map by Alvarez Barreiro. Although the Spanish encountered numerous native groups in much earlier expeditions, no group names were recorded until well into the 18th century. Finished and first published in 1728, this map is best known from the 1770 copy shown here. Original in the British Library.

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Source: <http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/coast/peoples/>