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Cabeza de Vaca, Estebanico,
and the Language of Diversity in Laila
Lalami's *The Moor's Account*

ABSTRACT

Published in 1542, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *La relación* is a chronicle of the Pánfilo de Narváez's 1527 expedition to the New World in which Cabeza de Vaca was one of the four survivors. His account has received considerable attention. It has been appreciated and critically examined as a narrative of conquest and colonization, a work of ethnographic interest, and a text of some literary value. Documenting and fictionalizing for the first time in European history the experience of travelling/trekking in the region which now constitutes the Southwest in the United States, Cabeza de Vaca's story testifies to the sense of disorientation, as well as to the importance of psychological and cultural mechanisms of responsiveness and adaptability to a different environment. What allows the Moroccan-American contemporary writer Laila Lalami to follow that perspective in her book *The Moor's Account* (2017) is an imaginative transfer of the burden and satisfaction of narrating the story of the journey to the black Moroccan slave whose presence in the narratives of conquest and exploration was marginal. In Lalami's book, Estebanico becomes the central character and his role is ultimately identified with that of a writer celebrating the freedom of diversity, one who survives to use the transcultural experience of the past creatively in ways well suited to the needs of the current moment.

Keywords: account, Cabeza de Vaca, Estebanico, *La relación*, narrative, diversity.

"I have already stated that throughout all this country we went naked, and as we were unaccustomed to being so we cast our skins like serpents" (135), Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca writes in *La relación*, his exhilarating, hagiographically conceived account of the wanderings in the New World which began with his hopes for social ascent in the service of the Imperial venture, wealth, prestige and authority, but led to his recognizing the value of the personal adventure of descent into the realm of an elementary, existential experience in the service of God. Cabeza de Vaca's narrative progress leads through a paradoxical reality of the uncharted and the unnamed taking the familiar shapes of providential signs and redemptive patterns. In the trying barren desert conditions, the nakedness of the crown's treasurer of the Pánfilo de Narváez expedition means vulnerability and suffering, but it also means openness to change and readiness to embrace the new and the different in confrontation with an alien cultural environment. Without his armor and his clothes, "naked as I was born," Cabeza de Vaca often becomes lost, yet his own otherness is then less visible, less threatening, less endangering. Shedding the skin of a conquistador, exposed to the natural forces which by testing his endurance allow him, with God's guidance, to discover the power of his own virtues and skills, he is "like" an Indian. "Indianized but not an Indian, Spanish speaking but not a Spaniard," Juan Bruce-Novoa writes in "Shipwrecked in the Seas of Signification," Cabeza de Vaca remains as "unanchored" in the Indian territory as earlier at sea, his element being "alterability" (13). There is an underlying unease, a troubling ambiguity about his sense of identity, which at the end of his journey, in San Miguel, he lets the voices of the Indians accompanying him articulate:

The Indians cared little or nothing for what was told them; and conversing among themselves said the Christians lied: that we had come whence the sun rises, and they whence it goes down; we healed the sick, they killed the sound; that we had come naked and barefooted, while they had arrived in clothing and on horses with lances; that we were not covetous of anything, but all that was given to us, we directly turned to give, remaining with nothing; that the others had the only purpose to rob whomsoever they found, bestowing nothing to any one.

In this way they spoke of all matters respecting us, which they enhanced by contrast with matters concerning the others, delivering their response through the interpreter of the Spaniards. (Cabeza de Vaca 139–40)

"Us" refers to Cabeza de Vaca and his three companions who, for over eight years of their wanderings, had little time to give thought to the great quest for profit that Narváez's expedition promised. "Others" are now

the Spaniards, not the Indians, whom Cabeza de Vaca fails to convince that “we [the farers] were of the Christians” (138). The Spaniards remain suspicious, as they were when they first saw Cabeza de Vaca “strangely habited as I was, and in company with Indians” and chose to keep a safe distance from him. From their perspective, the narrative makes clear, de Vaca’s resurrection was dubious, neither to be hailed nor unwelcome (especially because his no longer undisputable countrymen “wished to make slaves of the Indians we brought”) (138–39).

After his miraculous return, it does not take de Vaca long to read signs of being culturally “shipwrecked” again. He survived Indian captivity by developing his mediating skills as a trader between tribes and, most efficiently, as a *curandero*, whose traditional role is “to interconnect the spiritual with the physical” (Bruce-Novoa 13). In scenes which can be read as symbolic representations of the marriage of the Christian and the Indigenous (to which the Spanish Church willingly gave consent recognizing the importance of “practical” means in achieving its goals), Cabeza de Vaca writes of the days when, by saying prayers over the bodies of the sick Indians, by making the sign of the cross and by repeatedly breathing on them, he and his companions were able to cure even those “having all the appearances of death” (138). As healers, they can negotiate peace among the tribes: “Throughout these lands,” Cabeza de Vaca writes, “these who were at war with one another made peace to come to greet us and give us all they owned” (138). They did not own much, but they made the Spaniards, now the “children of the sun,” no longer fear either the scorching heat or the cold of the desert night. Once back to the comforts of New Galicia, their healing and the negotiating powers seem to diminish. Cabeza de Vaca’s belief that “to bring all these people to Christianity and subjection to Your Imperial Majesty, they must be won by kindness, the only certain way” (140) anticipates the inescapable rather than makes his appeal win the support off the practices of the Spaniards’ faith and rule. The blazing “Badthing” he learns about from the Avavares acquires distinctly Spanish features and is not to be laughed at or ridiculed.

It is not surprising that *La relación* has received so much critical attention and has been put to so many political uses, ranging from the construction of the Black Legend (in the United States the first English translation was published in 1871) to the construction of the Chicano identity (by being re-discovered as one of the fundamental texts which focus on cultural hybridity in the United States-Mexico borderlands). Likely to be initially conceived as a way of promoting further exploration of the New World (and the need for moral guidance in the endeavor), telling us of the adventure of mobility and adaptability, the text of *La relación* opens itself to the flow of various interpretations and proves

particularly useful for commentators attempting to address concerns of the present moment. What proves helpful are the formal features of the account from 1536. It does not “sit,” as it were, in a single genre but moves from a fast-paced narrative taking necessary short-cuts to avoid monotony, to an essayistic, more scholarly explication, or more abstract speculation. It is this flexibility, with reference to both the experience it communicates and the literary form it is given, that some readers may accept as encouragement to view it in association with other cultural texts, however remotely these might be located. In a short essay for *A New Literary History of America*, Ilan Stavans writes of the account’s contextual affinities with the works of Jack London and Ernest Hemingway (“the ultimate frontier story . . . endurance and personal courage”), or these of Henry Thoreau (“civil disobedience and refusal of social norms”) and John Muir (“retreat into wilderness”) (15). Perhaps more direct lines of correspondence could be drawn between Cabeza de Vaca’s wanderer and Herman Melville’s Ishmael, an orphan who survives the wreck, remains curious of “barbarous coasts” and, as the multi-voiced “Quarter-Deck” chapter demonstrates so well, is always ready to embrace ethnic difference.

There were more than six hundred people, not all of them Spanish, who on 17 June, 1527 left the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River to sail the Atlantic. Those who survived were Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, and Estevanico (or Estebanico, or Esteban), Dorantes’s enslaved Moor. In Cabeza de Vaca’s account, the name of the Moroccan slave closes the list: “*el cuatro [sobserviente] se llama Estevanico, es negro alarabe, natural de Azamor*” (Lalami 324). Out of the margins of *La relación*, an early text documenting the colonization of America, and out of the politics of changing attitudes to the very concept of marginality, re-reading early texts in the light of their modern relevance, there emerges the figure of Estebanico in Laila Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014), a Pulitzer Prize finalist and an American Book Award winner. In the Moroccan-American writer’s book, the slave rises to the position of narrator and main protagonist. He is a Muslim, a religious man, and he begins appropriately: “In the name of God, most compassionate, most merciful. Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds, and prayers and blessings be on our prophet Muhammad and upon all his progeny and companions” (3). This is a strong statement of faith, but such invocations of a single religion as a source of strength are, in fact, less frequent and less intrusive in the “moor’s account” than in Cabeza de Vaca’s; declarative as they appear, they speak also of the narrator’s fascination with words, their sounds and the ways of putting them together into compositional designs. He begins the story of the journey from Azemmur to La Florida to Mexico City to Hawikuh (whose colors

“the servants of the empire” mistook for those of the Seven Cities of Gold) by reclaiming his real name: Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori. His must be a “humble work,” as he says of it, but the name of the author it bears has a ring of pride and elation to it that makes it sound in no way inferior to that of the author of *La relación*. More importantly, it aspires to be a “true story,” not an alternative but a corrective to the text of the “rival storyteller,” Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. As Estebanico, he was a slave to the Castilian men of power; as Mustafa he is a free man again, much more so than his ex-masters, “bound by the rules of the society” they belong to and “led [in their narratives] to omit certain events while exaggerating others, and to suppress some details while inventing others” (3). Whether “black or white, master or slave, rich or poor, man or woman,” Mustafa writes in the introduction to his story (more properly, a series of stories at times rejecting the rigidity of chronological order), we all want to “survive the eternity of darkness” (3–4). This is, of course, Lalami’s voice playing with her protagonist’s and telling us of the fears and the courage of those who practice the religion of writing, and rather than being victimized by viewing its goals dogmatically, celebrate the adventure of telling the “truth in the guise of entertainment” (4). *The Moor’s Account* makes the reader (and whenever Lalami has Estebanico say emphatically “reader,” she means to address both Western and Eastern audiences) aware of the pleasure of “literary” freedom on a journey across various traditions, conventions, narrative patterns of discovery, with self-discovery at the very heart of the process of telling.

There still remains the question of credibility: can Estebanico’s way of weaving the narrative of his “wondrous adventures” bring us any closer to the “truth” today than the Spaniards’ way of reading various signs could bring them to earthly or heavenly riches then? In a critical discussion of Lalami’s book for *The New York Review of Books*, Wyatt Mason wrote: “The trouble with Lalami’s version—scrupulously researched, dependably in line with the trajectory de Vaca describes in detail—is that the voice she has forged to fill the silence of history, the written voice of Mustafa’s own account in which Estebanico at last speaks for himself, doesn’t seem plausibly that of a singular human being” (24). What weakens the voice’s plausibility and at the same time empowers it with the possibility of reaching a wider audience (by modern standards) is that Mustafa’s text is not in Arabic, or in Spanish, or in Portuguese, but in English. Estebanico’s chances of becoming a successful trader in Morocco, then of surviving in America, and finally of finding there (in a Zuni village) a place he can call his home depend largely on what he declares to be his “love” of and “a certain ease” with languages. Mustafa’s command of English, however, as Mason notes and as Lalami writes about herself in a passage quoted in the review, is clearly the proof

of the “linguistic versatility” of the author born in Morocco, living in the United States, holding a PhD in linguistics, coming to love literature through her knowledge of French, writing and teaching in English. Readers may still raise their brows in wonder when Mustafa writes about the Moroccan boys’ school “credentials” (32) or his wife’s, Oyomasot’s, reluctance “to listen to her mother’s complaints about her many idiosyncracies” (242) or when he provides a historical frame for his account by reporting on events in the wider world, including the news about the King of England who “wrested himself from the authority of the Church and married a courtesan named Anne Boleyn” (283). Equally puzzling may be the use of colloquial idioms that evidently belong to much later epochs. Indeed, the trouble with such intrusion of elements pertaining to “foreign” linguistic registers is that they are of an incidental rather than a systematic nature and can hardly be explained by the narrative’s self-conscious practice of following uniformly a certain conventional strategy. On the other hand, could they not be seen as small, somewhat provocative gestures adding to the sense of authorial freedom, winks given to the reader, knowingly or unknowingly, suggesting the possibility of communicating meanings which transcend a particular historical moment? As there is no information about Estebanico’s life, Lalami may invent (and she occasionally lets readers clearly see that she is doing so) her own story that will best serve her purposes and lead its narrator to his experience in America, where it can intersect with that of Cabeza de Vaca’s and the meanings he and his commentators want to give it.

We learn, for example, that in Azemmur, when he was seven, Mustafa preferred the souq to the classroom. On market days he would skip school to watch fortune-tellers, faith healers, herbalists, apothecaries, beggars, and listen to the stories they “told or foretold” which “comforted people, inspired them, allowed them to imagine a future they had denied themselves” (33). An early memory takes him back to a tent at the market where “men of different ages and stations, merchants in linen clothes, farmers in patched jellabas, or Jews in customary black” (33) gathered around the figure of the healer speaking with a strange accent and bringing relief to a black patient by covering his back with hot glasses, “little towers of different colors.” In their desire to see the effects of the treatment, the people in the tent are “united.” It is at this point that Mustafa recognizes in the patient his own father. The father would like Mustafa to follow his profession of a notary, “a dutiful recorder of events in other people’s lives” (33), but on that market day he also makes his son understand that his way of serving others and experiencing a sense of community and brotherhood would be a lonely way of an outcast telling his own story. Reader, he seems to be saying, I have just let you witness with me an act of healing as transcendence of divisions, acceptance of difference and variety. Such an act must take

different forms and, as in Cabeza de Vaca's narrative, it can be hinted at or explicitly present to serve more didactic ends. It is not accidental that, years later, Estebanico is entrusted with the task of furnishing sails for the rafts which may hopefully bring a party of lost travellers to the safety of an abandoned ship. He collects and sews together old pieces of cloth: flags, sheets, shirts, vestments, handkerchiefs. When unfurled, the sails, made up of "a great jumble of colors, textures and shapes," catch wind and the slave's heart fills with a liberating sense of "boundless pride" (135). Is he suggesting connections between what he manages to accomplish so well for the benefit of his companions and the satisfaction he gets from weaving the text for his readers in the manner both foretelling and reminiscent of Melville's *sobreviviente*, or his humble, consumptive "Usher" who, to dust his collection of books, uses a handkerchief "with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world"?

It is a long and dangerous way from Azemmur to Mexico-Tenochtitlán where Mustafa's account nears its end, but what he has to tell us there, more directly than on the occasion of making the sails, confirms and strengthens what the market experience revealed to his awakened senses. In a crowded cathedral on the feast of Santiago de Apostol, contemplative and rebellious, Mustafa thinks about other ways of healing than what bishop Zumárraga's "gospel of peace" promises Indians. By that time he has already seen and heard enough to admit having been, through his silence, an accomplice to "pillaging, beatings, and rapes," to hate dogmatism won and supported by means of whips, swords and muskets, as well as dogmatism wearing the guise of kindness. No wonder that when the smoke from the burning candles fills his eyes with tears and makes him sneeze in the profound silence of the cathedral, Cabeza de Vaca leans forward and frowns in his direction. That he should be used a "model" in a mission of conversion which would make Indians "flock" to the Catholic church, "just as the multitudes in Italy flooded to Saint Francis," strikes him as "irony," not so much because of his Islamic faith but because he feels "as far removed from the bishop's idea of a proper Christian as any Indian was" (275). He and Cabeza de Vaca were and are still together, but the black slave seems to have walked a longer and brighter way. Having learned his own lesson of "alterability," having adopted the Indian ways and "spoken their languages," he calls for an all-embracing church. His own voice has a missionary quality (with Emersonian overtones), but it helps him endure the cathedral's stifling atmosphere:

Standing in that half-finished church, surrounded by statues of prophets and saints, I wondered why God created so many varieties of faiths in the world if He intended all of us to worship Him in the same fashion. This

thought had never occurred to me when I was a young boy memorizing the Holy Qur'an, but as I spent time with Indians I came to see how limiting the notion of one truth really was. Was the diversity in our beliefs, not their unity, the lesson God wanted to impart? Surely it would have been in His power to make us of one faith if that had been His wish. Now the idea that there was only one set of stories for all of mankind seemed strange to me. (275–76)

When Mustafa rushes out of the cathedral “desperate for fresh air,” he stumbles over “an old Indian man with a branded face and a missing arm,” a victim of the Spanish conquest in whom he can perhaps also see his one-armed father. The church he runs away from will remain “half-finished” as long as it fails to embrace diversity. Mustafa’s new idea is a very old one. It is, however, Lalami shows, always worth being put again in a story which, by a new version of the past it offers and a variety of readings it hopes to receive in the future, gives the idea further significance, just as by circulating among the Indians, the story of Estebanico’s healing powers made these powers stronger with the story’s every new telling.

The belief that “a good story can heal” (231) is as much part of the Eastern as of the Western tradition. Mustafa discovers that what he learned in the teeming markets of Azemmur holds true in the barren landscapes of America. It does not seem to trouble Lalami that her narrator’s discovery was that of one blazing the cultural trail of correspondences for the first time while her and the reader’s discovery is mediated by the pleasure of finding analogies between Mustafa’s imagined narrative and the many texts of and about indigenous cultures testifying to such correspondences. One cannot help thinking about Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” first presented orally, and later acquiring the status of a classic cultural essay. Giving examples of various therapeutic functions of storytelling, she concludes by remembering an old Indian woman, her Aunt Suzie, talking about “going over there,” by which, Silko realizes, she does not mean dying but “a journey that perhaps we can only begin to understand through an appreciation for the boundless capacity of language, which, through storytelling brings us together, despite great distances between cultures, despite great distances in time” (357). Lalami’s book also finds its place on the library shelves next to the Chicana/o writers, such as Rudolfo Anaya or Pat Mora, whose fictional and poetic *curanderas* and *curanderos* speak of ways of healing the individual and communal wounds in the borderlands Mustafa traveled through, and of the actual local practitioners of the art of verbal healing, such as Elena Avila who in *Woman Who Glows in the Dark* defines a *plática* in terms that writers of all cultures and all times may wish to define their work: “an exchange that

happens between my heart and my client” (150). Assuming the role of a shaman or *curandero*, Mustafa “listened to the sick man or woman and offered consolation in the guise of a long story” (Lalami 212). The story may be one of the many his mother told him when he was a little boy in Azemmur.

“Reader,” Mustafa says at some point, “the joy of a story is in the telling” (124), and the reader knows he is speaking of the kind of joy denied in the official Spanish narratives which, whether written or oral, are “synonymous with power” (128). In order to be told well, the stories need to be listened to well, the way Mustafa and his companions learn to listen when the Avavares tell them about “their ancestors, their neighbors, good and bad, the spirits that populate their world” (232). In a scene when Dorantes, accompanied by his slave, Castillo and Cabeza de Vaca are having dinner with Cortés (Estebanico is there because he has important information, while no other guests are invited as the conversation is confidential), the host neither enjoys the food nor expects to hear a long story told in a good way. Rather, he demands clear answers to direct questions he asks, although, having spies in the province, he already knows some of them. What really interests him are distances measured in dates and other clues helping to draw “a precise map” necessary for further exploration of the land; the Spanish crown cannot afford to let the territory north of the Rio Grande hide its riches. “We are doers, señores. Doers,” Lalami imagines Cortés saying to his guests. Eager “to say something that would interest or impress the famous Cortés,” Dorantes speaks “quickly” (290-91). Cabeza de Vaca seems more reserved but, as Mustafa observes, he finds Cortés’s “we” flattering. He is with his Spanish countrymen now and feels honored to have his position in their hierarchical, formalized world finally affirmed. He was different in the northern deserts. There, in a setting strikingly contrasting with the scene of the official banquet in the garden of the Cuernavaca fortress, Cabeza de Vaca hugged Mustafa “like a brother” after their long separation in the wilderness and could listen to his stories “with attention, neither interrupting nor hurrying [him]” (217). He would then give his own account of life among Indians and let Mustafa discover in the Spaniard “a kindred spirit, a fellow storyteller” (217). In *The Moor’s Account*, Mustafa never gets a chance to read Cabeza de Vaca’s account. However, because they have experienced the same shipwrecks and shared the horrors and the joys of a long walk as slaves and masters of their fate, Mustafa knows of the double purpose the narrative will serve. It will be delivered, personally and proudly, by Cabeza de Vaca to the imperial court and read officially as the Joint Report for possible signs of the mirage of wealth, becoming an incentive for another journey of conquest which will bring more suffering and more destruction. But long after Cabeza de Vaca

has traveled home to Castile and long after his narrative has gathered dust in the state archives together with other documents of diminishing literal worth, it will emerge again as yet another, personal and humble, record of the brotherhood and sisterhood of storytellers struggling to make life meaningful, each in his or her own way. Like a shaman's or a *curandero's* practice, it may do harm and it may do good.

When Cabeza de Vaca disappears from his narrative, Mustafa appears as Estebanico again in the text about Francisco Vásquez de Coronado's expedition. This time, however, he will not let himself be enslaved. He has been there before. He has redeemed his own primary sin of greed he committed as a trader in Azemmur and he has recovered from the humiliation of having sold himself to Narvaéz's greed. When "[e]verything was lost," he feels compelled to re-affirm his freedom by re-establishing his position of the writer of his own narrative: "I still had one thing. My story" (Lalami 296). Fiction comes to rescue. He will remain free by pretending to be a slave. When Coronado, Marco de Niza and others set out on their journey north to look for the Seven Cities of Gold, they make the mistake of using Mustafa rather than Estebanico for their guide. As befits a lover of different languages growing more and more versatile in the "seas of signification," he devises a scheme based on a system of signs which will allow him to keep a safe distance from those who claim to be his masters and, at the same time, bring him closer to the place which he himself wants to reach and which has nothing in common with their misplaced goals. Mustafa's idea wins the support of Father Marco, a frustrated recorder of the expedition not used to the discomforts of the journey, who cannot fail to see how appropriate the idea's clarity is in the conditions of the territory they are about to enter and how flattering it is to his own ambitions. Finding no joy in writing, Father Marco is a poor reader of ironic meanings. According to the plan, Mustafa will proceed alone ahead of the main party to inquire about the location of the Seven Cities of Gold and to allow Marco de Niza to be "properly introduced" to the Indians. The splendor of the riches he learns of will be signaled to his followers by the size of the crosses left behind him. If, which should not be doubted, the place the black slave discovers is as rich as Tenochtitlán, "the signal would be a white cross the size of a man" (316). Once Mustafa reaches Hawikuh, with its walls lit by the evening sun reminding him of his hometown in the East, he explains to Ahku, the cacique of the Zunis, that with the power of the white people's weapons the only way to stop Father Marco's advance is "to create a fiction": "A story? Ahku asked. Yes. I replied." Father Marco, and through him Coronado, will receive the news that Mustafa never found what they were looking for and that he was killed by the "fierce Indians." Thus, he will be born as a free man again, since his masters will not take

the risk of avenging the death of a black slave. When not fully convinced, Ahku asks: “What if the white man in Vacapa does not believe your story,” to which Mustafa replies: “He will . . . if the messengers know how to tell it” (319–20). This is the writer’s signature that Laila Lalami puts in her book and while a question mark, perhaps intentionally, still lingers over the degree of originality she manages to accomplish in it, one never doubts the honesty of her ambition.

In the last paragraph of his narrative, Mustafa offers his story to the child he will have with the Indian woman, Oyomasot. It openly celebrates the act of writing as a fully democratic act of accepting difference. Mustafa wants to make sure that the text he is about to finish, a guide to a new life he will be remembered by, is properly understood. “Properly” does not hide irony. Nor does “really” in “what really happened,” as long as the story finds its strength in being one of the many possible. With Oyomasot’s hand on his cheek, Mustafa remembers his mother’s stories. He “fed” on them when he was lost, when “he needed comfort or when [he] wanted to give it to others” (320). The Moroccan stories, some most likely not of native origin, crossed “the Ocean of Fog and Darkness” to prove their healing powers and, changed perhaps in the process of being told to accommodate different conditions, became transcultural and extraterritorial. The one who knows how to tell stories transgresses the division of gender as well; Mustafa is like an Indian and like a mother. However naked and childlike it made Cabeza de Vaca appear, the Spaniard’s narrative could no more suggest such a metamorphosis of perspective than it could describe the colors and the shapes of Hawikuh. It is not so much despite the questions of plausibility and transparency of the literary tricks it uses, but rather with their assistance that the “guise of entertainment” in Lalami’s book wants to take itself seriously and to convince the reader to do likewise. The imaginative proposition conjured from the past and given the name of Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdussalam al-Zamori is didactic and it ends with a strong emphasis on its reference to our time:

The servants of the Spanish empire have given a different story to their king and their bishop, their wives and their friends. The Indians with whom I lived for eight years, each one of them, each one of thousands, have told yet other stories. Maybe there is no true story, only imagined stories, vague reflections of what we saw and what we heard, what we felt and what we thought. Maybe if our experiences, in all their glorious, magnificent colors, were somewhat added up, they would lead us to the blinding light of the truth. To God belong the east and the west, whichever way you turn, there is the face of God. God is great. (320–21)

The language of diversity, the author of *The Moor’s Account* tells us convincingly in a stylized voice, may be a true religion.

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