For this paper assignment, you will be joining the team of collaborators working on an important new Digital Humanities Initiative, titled “Native Bound-Unbound: Archive of Indigenous Enslavement,” which is being supported by a large grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The broad mission of “Native Bound-Unbound is to document the individual life trajectories of indigenous people who were enslaved across the Americas since 1492—a project that, as it develops, will cross-reference multilingual archival sources (things like official colonial records, manuscript correspondence, church baptismal records, census data, ship manifests, &c.); indigenous histories (oral and material forms of tribal record-keeping, individual testimonies, and so on); and modern geographical information systems (utilizing historical maps and cartography, geodetic data, and digital forms of spatial representation). It will incorporate documentation drawn from published print culture dating from the late 15th-Century—that is to say, the American literary archive. This is where we come in.

As we’ve discussed in class, the vast majority of texts we’ve read this semester thus far document the presences of enslaved indigenous people—from the six Taino people Columbus mentions having captured in his Diario (Oct. 11, 1492), to Sacagawea (a Shoshone woman who was captured by the Hidatsa, then sold to Charbonneau, and who is today widely admired as a national heroine), in the Journals of Lewis and Clark. A brief inventory of texts from our syllabus that document examples of indigenous enslavement would include:

Christopher Columbus, Diario;  
Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, La Relación/Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition;  
El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, La Florida;  
Thomas Harriot, A Briefe and True Report of the New Lands Found in Virginia;  
Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, Historia de la Nueva Mexico;  
The Journals of Lewis and Clark  
Lydia Maria Child, Letters from New York (XXXVI).

For this paper, your task is to: 1) select one of these texts; 2) describe the documentation of indigenous enslavement provided by an authoritative edition of that text, and record its bibliographic citation in a Native Bound-Unbound database; 3) perform some preliminary secondary research to trace the life trajectories of those enslaved peoples as best as you can beyond what is documented within the text (and reckon with where the stories of their lives seem to end); and, 4) to use the information you’ve gathered to write a short reflective essay of 4-5 pages in which you reflect on what it means to place this particular story of indigenous enslavement at the center of an interpretive approach to your chosen literary text. As we’ve discussed in class, one of the enduring fascinations of colonial-era literatures is that they seem to tell so many stories, both those they purport to tell and those that may be archived only incidentally within them. For Cabeza de Vaca, for example, the story he wants to tell is a tale of honorable service and spectacular misfortune—a nine-year calamity in which he “walked lost and naked through many and very strange lands” yet remained ever faithful to Christ and to the Spanish crown.
Yet, as we’ve discussed, that text also records several other stories: one, about indigenous trade networks (connecting the Floridian peninsula to central Mexico); another, about the advent of syncretic medical and spiritual practices like curanderismo; and, also, the story of the capture and enslavement of 600 indigenous people by Captain Diego de Alcaráz, in the vicinity of Culiacán. How might we think differently about that text if we stage that last story as the jumping-off point of our interpretation? How does it throw other aspects of Cabeza de Vaca’s story into new relief? How might we use that story, and stories like it from this incidental literary archive of indigenous enslavement, to read against the grain of the colonial project? While I ask you to develop a thesis in this work, and to quote judiciously and strategically from primary and secondary sources, you need not write a conventional “English paper”—instead, feel free and encouraged to write reflectively, conjecturally, and imaginatively about what it means to do this kind of work, and to venture bold ideas about how we might reimagine that kind of work.

THIS PAPER IS DUE VIA BLACKBOARD ON THURSDAY, APRIL 20, AT 11:59 P.M.