

“I could right what had been made wrong”: Laila Lalami’s appropriation of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*

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Abstract:

This paper investigates Arab American novelist Laila Lalami (b. 1968)’s re-writing of Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca’s *La Relación*, a travelogue that chronicles Spanish conquistador Panfilo de Narváez (1470–1528)’s expedition to claim La Florida to the Spanish crown in the sixteenth century. Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account* (2014) is a historical novel narrated by Mustafa ibn Muhammad ibn Abdulssalam al-Zamori, a Moroccan slave known in Spanish annals as Estevanico/Estebanico, who was one of four survivors of the Narváez expedition and whose testimony, unlike those of his Castilian companions, was left out of the official record. As a postcolonial historical novel, *The Moor’s Account* recovers Mustafa’s voice and empowers him to narrate the adventures he undertakes in La Florida for eight years. The paper argues that in re-imagining and re-constructing Mustafa’s story, Lalami appropriates and adapts Aphra Behn’s seventeenth century novel *Oroonoko* (1688) which is one of the earliest English novels to foreground the themes of displacement and enslavement through relating the eponymous hero’s adventures in Surinam. Hence, this study is both analytical and comparative: on the one hand, the paper gives a close reading of Lalami’s *The Moor’s Account*; on the other hand, the paper highlights the similarities and differences between the two texts. The two novels attempt to recover the silenced voices of two African men / Moors who have traded in slaves and were themselves enslaved at a later point in their lives. At the same time, the two novels differ in their narrative techniques, representation of women and dénouements.

Keywords: adaptation, appropriation, Aphra Behn, Arab American Literature, Laila Lalami, *The Moor’s Account* (2014), postcolonial historical novel

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