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The Story of How Estebanico Became Mustafa in Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account*: Retelling Stories in a Post-Colonial Light

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Abstract

Both post-colonialism and historical novels are highly topical research themes in today's literary field, but storytelling as a genre has lost its status. This essay aims to look at the importance of storytelling in the 2014 published novel *The Moor's Account*, and how storytelling can be connected to post-colonial rewritings of history. This is achieved through looking at the emphasis on storytelling in the novel, and then drawing connections between retelling stories and rewriting history. Finally this is situated in a post-colonial discourse and analysis. This essay concludes that author Laila Lalami successfully integrates a Moroccan literary tradition of storytelling with a rewriting of a Western travelogue, while also using the act of telling stories to give a voice and identity to a silenced historical person. Lalami's novel also shows how the multi-voiced aspect of retelling stories promotes diversity, and that the far from primitive genre of storytelling has a given place in literature generally, and in post-colonial novels especially.

Keywords: storytelling, post-colonialism, plurality, diversity, New Historicism, identity, history, rewritings, hybridity, Morocco, Cabeza de Vaca, Laila Lalami

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Introduction

The world is filled with stories: stories about a long lost past, stories about people, stories about events and even stories about yourself and people around you. We are all responsible for retaining these stories through listening to them, and retelling them. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, stories are always in movement and are not supposed to stand still: they should reflect our present reality ("African Literature"). Despite this, all stories do not make it into the present: in 1527, a ship sailed to America from Spain with Castilian conquistadors. Out of this extensive mission, known as the Narváez expedition, only four people survived, and they continued to explore North America on their own for nearly ten years. Among them was a slave – a black Moroccan man given the name Estebanico by the Christians. After the group had been found, they were all asked to report what had happened to them, except for the slave Estebanico. Not only was he not asked to tell his story; he was also largely ignored in the retelling of the journey. One of the men, Cabeza de Vaca, wrote a lengthy account of what had happened to them, but in contrast to the other two explorers traveling with Cabeza de Vaca, Estebanico is scarcely mentioned in the text. Still, other Spaniards trusted Estebanico's knowledge of The New World so much that they afterwards made him guide for a new expedition. Though he is now considered one of the first black explorers of America, his life story has deliberately been left in the shadows.

But what if his story could come alive again in the 21st century? In the historical novel[1] *The Moor's Account,* Moroccan-American writer Laila Lalami lets Estebanico, or Mustafa as she names him, write his own account of the expedition. With his newfound voice, Estebanico comes alive as Mustafa ibn Mohammad and uses his voice to talk back to his captivators. The importance of being able to tell one's story is emphasized throughout the novel, both for personal reasons as well as it being one step further towards reaching a truthful multi-voiced depiction of reality.

This essay will investigate the significance of storytelling[2] in Laila Lalami's *The Moor's Account,* as well as making connections between storytelling and rewriting of

[1] As in novels where the story is set in the past, thus portraying our history.
[2] Storytelling in the sense of actively telling a story to an audience, and often with the aim to transfer the stories from one person to another.

history, and how these concepts relate to a post-colonial approach. I argue that *The Moor's Account* uses the strong African tradition of telling and retelling stories to illuminate subjectivity and diversity in a post-colonial world where we now question representations in history. This will be done by focusing on mainly three topics.

First of all, I will discuss storytelling and how it is connected with Mustafa's need of a subjective narrative and his right to a personal story. Secondly, I will discuss Laila Lalami's rewriting of history as well as incorporate New Historicism as a literary theory, and look at what place historical novels have in our literary landscape today. The third part of this essay will focus on post-colonialism, that is, a possible reason behind writing *The Moor's Account* and how the novel is giving voice to someone who had none. Here, the novel will be analyzed from a post-colonial perspective. I will use the name *Mustafa* when referring to the character in the novel, and *Estebanico* when referring to the historical person.

Telling a Story – Forming an Identity

During the 20th century and with the emergence of modernism, storytelling started to lose its literary status and became regarded as 'primitive' literature (Kroeber 2). But storytelling could in fact be one of the most important cultural ways of communicating we have, Kroeber asserts (3). There is a certain complexity in it that this essay will enter upon. Why do we tell stories? In connection to the strong African-American tradition of storytelling, Gates has this answer to the question:

> The stories that we tell ourselves and our children function to order our world, serving to create both a foundation upon which each of us constructs our sense of reality and a filter through which we process each event that confronts us every day. The values we cherish and wish to preserve, the behavior that we wish to censure, the fears and dread that we can barely confess in an ordinary language, the aspirations and goals that we most dearly prize – all of these things are encoded in the stories that each culture invents and preserves for the next generation, stories that, in effect, we live by and *through*. (17)

Seen like this, storytelling is a fundamental tool that we use to create ourselves and to make us reflect on our surroundings and impressions, and it is principally through a narrative that societies throughout time have defined themselves (Kroeber 3). Bruner points out that scholars today have left the idea of a self or a life being something in itself: it is entirely constructed (27). We do not only define but create ourselves through narrating our life. The studies of Bruner are focused on autobiographies, but his findings are of importance in fictitious works as well. *The Moor's Account* is a fictive autobiography, but an autobiography none the less. When you tell your own stories as you do in autobiographies, you often have a distance between the narrator and the protagonist at first. The narrator has a dissonant voice, looking back to the past and to an unexperienced protagonist. By the end of the biography, that protagonist has merged together with the narrator, forming a unified self, which is a structure that much resembles that of a *Bildungsroman* (Bruner 27). Mustafa in *The Moor's Account* is similarly looking back at the narrative of his life with a reflective perspective. Through writing about his life, he is also positioning himself in regard to his actions.

Storytelling is one of the most central themes in *The Moor's Account*. As previously stated, to narrate your life is to create yourself. When Lalami makes Mustafa the first person narrator of his life, she also gives him a subjective self and makes him come alive to the reader. Mustafa is aware of his role as a storyteller, and there are many examples in the novel where storytelling is a vital key to survival, comfort, progress and selfhood. The chapters in the novels are not referred to as chapters, but rather as different stories: "The Story of the Illusion" and "The Story of La Florida" for example. It is evident that storytelling is closely connected to Mustafa's identity, and has been ever since his early childhood in Morocco. Morocco is a country known for its ancient rich tradition of oral literature, and storytelling has been one of the main sources to education and entertainment (Njoku 41). Still to this day, storytellers tell stories in the market squares, especially Jemaa el-Fnaa in Marrakesh (Hamilton). In an interview with a storyteller in said market square, the interviewee explains what storytelling means to mankind and says that "through tales we choose how we want to be in life" (Al-HalqaFilm).

Moroccan scholars have foregrounded the roles of mothers when it comes to

bringing stories and storytelling forward (Njoku 41), and in Mustafa's case his mother seems to have a story for every occasion. The stories always soothe and help him as a child; his mother uses storytelling to make him mirror himself in others, and to make him question his own part in the stories, forcing him to think about himself and his actions:

> My mother had accustomed me to fairy tales in which it was easy for me to imagine myself, so I remained quiet as I thought about the Story of the Embroiderer and the Sultan. Was I the embroiderer, who should have been content with her gift and not sought out that which was beyond her reach? Or was the story about my father? Was he like the sultan? (*TMA* 53-54)

Already early on in *The Moor's Account*, storytelling is closely linked to subjectivity and the self. Mustafa and his family build up their lives on their own stories; for example, Mustafa is repeatedly told "The Story of My Birth" by his mother, which is a story she has created about the day he was born. His whole life began as a story, and being able to tell this story enables him to continue narrating it. But when it is Mustafa's father who tells him the story of his birth, it is instead in the guise of the Story of How He Lost His Arm, because that version of the story suited their discussion better. It is the same event, but narrated by two different identities and therefore changed according to their viewpoints. One of the strongest complex elements in storytelling is the fact that stories are meant to be repeated – and that every repetition is unique (Kroeber 3). In this way, stories can become highly personal and can be employed to help you understand and describe the present reality. Bruner claims that when telling stores, we both want to tell something canonical, that is, something that people recognize and can mirror themselves in, but in order to also create subjectivity and identity, we have to tell something that is specific to our life only: something non-canonical (29-30). After hearing his mother's stories, Mustafa immediately starts to look for non-canonical signs in them, and Mustafa's father changes the story in order to bring in himself.

The story Mustafa has created about his life is one of his most important possessions. When he becomes enslaved it is something that, in contrast to everything else in his life, is his own. When Mustafa's owner Dorantes bids him to tell his life story, he is at first reluctant to share it – once it is out there, it is no longer only his story but shared with

others, and in particular with his owner. Jackson writes that storytelling is a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (15). To tell a story is a highly existential matter. Despite this, Mustafa chooses to tell the Story of His Life and finds that it soothes him. His cultural connection to traditional storytelling is strong after all, and telling stories is in fact an action where narrator meets narratee, and where people produce and reproduce themselves (Jackson 252). After having told his story, Mustafa even hopes it will catch on in Dorantes' mind, making him retell the story to his children and thus giving it a chance to live on even though Mustafa himself does not. Mustafa says that "telling a story is like sowing a seed – you always hope to see it become a beautiful tree, with firm roots and branches that soar up in the sky. But it is a peculiar sowing, for you will never know whether your seed sprouts or dies" (*TMA* 125). Regardless of whether his story sprouts or dies, the passage where Mustafa shares his story with Dorantes is the point in the novel where Dorantes starts to regard Mustafa less as a slave and more as a fellow human being. The process of telling a life story here elevates Mustafa's subjective voice and identity.

Similar to how Mustafa regains subjectivity, storytelling serves as a way for the group of four survivors to rise from their low status among the native tribes. When Mustafa and Cabeza de Vaca tell thrilling stories around the fire at night, the listeners **appreciate** the European newcomers more. Through the stories, the four of them now gain more than just food; they are given gifts in form of blankets to keep them warm, a sense of self-worth. This further shows how the process of telling stories joins people together and makes them more open towards each other, which, in fact, ties in with Kroeber's argument that storytelling is one of the primary ways to smoothly cross sociocultural borders (3).

When Mustafa becomes famous as a healer among the natives, he once again uses his deep respect and understanding of stories to help people. He finds that many times, someone in pain needs to talk about their situation and find someone who listens to them assuredly. He has learnt from his childhood in Azemmur that "a good story can heal" (*TMA* 231), and this can of course be connected to himself; he tells us his story because he needs to have a listener in order to heal. As earlier mentioned, Mustafa is writing this story in retrospective, and while doing so he has trouble coming to terms with the fact that he

himself once traded with slaves. He is ashamed of his behavior towards slaves as well as towards the indigenous people of America, but writing about it makes him atone for what he has done. The reflective part of storytelling here functions as a therapeutic tool for Mustafa.

It is in the final chapters that the power of being a good storyteller really comes through. Mustafa has realized that his days as a slave are still not at an end, and that he needs to do something about it. He convinces a friar to let him go ahead to the next villages, and that he must send a messenger back telling the friar if there is gold in that village or not. Mustafa sends back messenger after messenger with bad news until he and his wife are left alone, but to fully reach independence, he is forced to dissolve his identity as Estebanico the slave. This is done through creating a fictitious story. Mustafa now tells the story of how Estebanico was killed by the Hawiku tribe, and that this story can be believed if one only knows how to tell it – Mustafa is by this time someone who is well-versed in the act of storytelling. Mustafa also tells the leader of the tribe that fiction will help save them: if they are rumored to be dangerous and to have killed Estebanico the Moor, who has been so good at communicating successfully with natives, maybe the white men will stay away. Mustafa says that "[the leader's] only means of salvation was to create a fiction" (*TMA* 319). To tell stories here saves a number of peoples' lives, and most importantly this passage shows the identity-forming qualities of storytelling: it gives Mustafa back his true identity as Mustafa ibn Muhammad, not Estebanico the Moor.

According to Cavero, there is a desire to connect your identity with narration, and this desire is mainly a product of us perceiving "ourselves and others as unique beings whose identity is narratable in a life story" (33). In other words, we think of everyone as someone in possession of a story about his or her life. Cavero says that this desire of ours is a desire to find a unity in our life (37) – a life story gives us a beginning, a (perhaps open) ending, and content in between that unifies our identity. This can be connected to Mustafa choosing to tell us about the Story of His Birth – in order to begin his story, he needs to know the beginning of his life. When you have the beginning of something, you can fill in the rest through relying on your personal memories.

Having memories is important to us: Cavero writes that "the self makes her home in

the narrating memory" (34). As stories about Mustafa's adventures in America are intertwined with stories about his life in Morocco, he uses memories in combination with storytelling while in America to mentally get closer to home, and also to create a sense of home; he relives his life in Africa through telling the reader about it. Mustafa's home is important to him; he repeatedly speaks of Azemmur in Morocco, and his goal and mantra in life is to return to his family.

The telling of a story is closely connected to the narrator of the story, and many would probably agree that a story is slightly changed when you hear it retold by somebody else. Every story is unique, as we have concluded, or as Jackson points out: "one might say that it is impossible to ever tell the same story twice" (231). During Mustafa's time as a healer, he becomes famous: so famous that stories about him start to circulate. The stories differ from each other, though; with every new person that tells the story, the magnitude of Mustafa's skills increases. Once again this is an example of how *The Moor's Account* shows that the narrator affects the story subjectively. What Mustafa concludes in the end of the novel is that we need to be able to listen to different versions of a story in order to make up as truthful a picture of our reality as possible. He says that "[m]aybe if our experiences, in all of their glorious, magnificent colors, were somehow added up, they would lead us to the blinding light of the truth" (*TMA* 321). This can be seen as an expression of how objectivity is unattainable (but that the occurrence of several subjective experiences is the closest thing to it).

Similarly, Cavero questions what objectivity in storytelling is, and arrives at the fact that "the tale indeed selects, cuts, discards" (42). We can therefore not even trust ourselves to describe the reality truthfully. From what Mustafa says about the need of multiple stories, we gather that he does not claim that his story is perfect and that it can be viewed in isolation. As Cavero discusses, we cannot rely on our personal memory. It produces a false, probably narcissistic, version of reality (40). But luckily, there are other people who can help you tell a story and change things in it. Retelling of stories is therefore a way to broaden our conception of the world, through contributing our own perspective while also challenging others'. This brings me to discussing what kind of retelling Laila Lalami herself has made.

Retelling A Story – New Historicism and Historical Fiction

If Mustafa is the storyteller inside the fictitious world, Laila Lalami is our storyteller outside it, and as *The Moor's Account* is a historical novel, she is retelling not only a story, but *history* with a new voice. What text is it then that Lalami, in line with the very fashion of storytelling, has read and chosen to retell?

Cabeza de Vaca's *La Relación* is a famous book written for the emperor Charles V after de Vaca had come home to Spain following his adventures in North America, published in 1542 (Adorno and Pautz 25). In a second edition, the book has been called *Shipwrecks*, but has also been referred to as *The Account*. Apart from this text, there is only one other remaining primary source, which is a transcription of the report the explorers gave (except for Estebanico) referred to as the Joint Report; the original report is unfortunately lost (Reséndez "First Encounters" 37). As *La Relación* is written in a detailed narrative similar to Mustafa's narrative, we can assume that Lalami has used this text as her main source of information when writing *The Moors Account*. As Mustafa puts it in the introduction:

> I intend to correct the details of the history that was compiled by my companions, the three Castilian gentlemen known by the names of Andrés Dorantes de Carranza, Alonso del Castillo Maldonado, and especially Álvar Núñes Cabeza de Vaca, who delivered their testimony, what they called the joint report, to the Audiencia of Santo Domingo. The first was my legal master, the second my fellow captive, and the third my rival storyteller. (*TMA* 3)

Mustafa here regards Cabeza de Vaca as his rival storyteller, and thus a connection between *The Moors Account* and *La Relación* is unavoidably made.

Is it possible to view de Vacas text as anything but an account of historic events? If we look at it through the lens of New Historicism, it is highly possible. New Historicism is a literary approach that problematizes literatures relationship to history. One could say that they are co-dependent: history can be used to understand literature better, and literature can be used to understand history better. One of the main issues that New

Historicism brings forth is the current status of history as being written in a meta-language that is above other language uses (Bennett 52). How would historical writing be able to use a language different from the one we have? Historical writing is still *writing*, and that writing includes narrative and rhetorical devices (Bennett 52). According to Bennett, history should "be a way of telling stories without any particularly convincing means, where such stories differ, of deciding between them" (52). As Bennett here claims that writing history is like telling stories where the aim is that all stories should be given the chance to be told, history itself can then be viewed as storytelling that is striving for objectivity. This joins in with what Mustafa says about multiple stories reaching a blinding truth. From a New Historicist perspective, history is a "complex of relations between different regions of textuality, including literary" (Bennett 69). *La Relación* can in this way be seen as not only a historical source, but also as a literary work; even though *La Relación* was written by someone who aimed, and claimed, to write a non-fictional text about 'what really happened.

Adorno and Pautz suggest that de Vaca conciously had the future reader in mind when he wrote down his adventures, and that this curious reader at times would believe his story to be incredible (27). It could be said that Cabeza de Vaca was not only describing events with historical purposes but also taking on the role as a storyteller. In an epilogue to a translation of *La Relación,* the thought of viewing Cabeza de Vaca as a great writer is presented, and how he has inspired other authors after him:

> As William T. Pilkington has put it, 'Cabeza de Vaca was not only a physical trailblazer; he was also a literary pioneer, and he deserves the distinction of being called the Southwest's first writer. His narrative turned out to be a prototype of much American writing to come. (Reséndez "A Land So Strange" 250)

This being said, Laila Lalami is not only writing historical fiction, but also answering another literary text intertextually when she rewrites this story. She is not doing anything out of the ordinary; there are many examples where writers have taken the liberty of reworking another authors text, for example John Steinbecks rewriting of *Genesis* as *East of Eden*, Jean Rhys rewriting of *Jane Eyre* as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or Jane Smileys rewriting

of *King Lear* as *A Thousand Acres*. As retelling of stories is such a pervasive theme in *The Moors Account*, it is not difficult to assume that Lalami, the author behind Mustafas words, wants to tell us someone elses story in her own perspective. In many ways, Lalami has let her story carry intertextual echoes of de Vacas. It is not necessary to know Spanish, or to rely too much on a translation, to see that she has structured her novel similarly to how *La Relación* is structured: the chapters all deal with a certain stage of the expedition, and are named accordingly. Cabeza de Vacas text has one chapter named "The life of the Mariames and Yguaces", and Lalami has one chapter, or rather *story*, called "The Story of the Yguaces". It seems as if Lalami is telling us that just as Mustafas, de Vacas chapters are simply subjective *stories*.

Cabeza de Vaca is indeed presented as someone with the gift of being able to tell good stories in *The Moors Account*. As previously said, Mustafa sees de Vaca as a rival storyteller. On one occasion, Mustafa says about de Vaca that "he had always loved to tell stories, but now his memories of the expedition were entered into the official record, invalidating others" (*TMA* 287). Mustafas memories and abilities as a storyteller, in his case his identity, are in this moment dissolved and invalidated – whatever he would say could not challenge de Vacas words. As Adorno and Pautz claim, Cabeza wrote *La Relación* very much in order to present himself in a favorable light, describing how he had served the crown. Even if he did want to boast about how he had helped the Spanish economy through conquering other peoples lands, norms and customs forbade him to do so, and thus wrote this account about "remarkable new information about the unknown lands and peoples to the north of New Spain" (25). Reséndez makes the same assumption as Adorno and Pautz when he criticizes de Vacas text for having excluded all assaults made on the native people by the Spanish people, which were recorded by other sources some ten years after the Narváez expedition (37).

When writing *The Moors Account*, Lalami has picked up on this and chooses to show the explorers violence. In the novel, the Native Americans are kept hostages, tortured, raped and killed. The characterization of de Vaca as a liar is also visible in the novel. According to Mustafa, de Vaca changes their story quite drastically when he speaks to the Spanish men in order to put himself in a favorable light: in his new version of the story de

Vaca never fell for the lies about gold which they heard about, and he never played any part in the dreadful decision to split the expedition in two. Mustafa tries to accept this, as he says "I told myself that he had altered some of its details because he was the one who told the story – he wanted to be its hero [...]" (*TMA* 250). This once again reconnects with the theme of subjective storytelling, and these words could also be Lalami justifying herself, explaining that she is changing details because she is now the one telling the story. Interestingly, Lalami has chosen not to let Mustafa take part in the violation of the natives. Would this really be the case? Be that as it may, Mustafa is probably still as biased a storyteller as de Vaca is. They are both in fact storytellers, working with fiction and imagination – *lies* should you so wish.

One part that Mustafa tells us differently than de Vaca is his role as a healer. In *The Moors Account*, Mustafa is the one with medical knowledge and the one who becomes idolized. He then involves the rest of the group of Castilians. In a translated version of *La Relación*, Cabeza de Vaca puts it this way:

> Up to now, Dorantes and his Negro had not attempted to practice; but under the soliciting pressure of these pilgrims from diverse places, we all became physicians, of whom I was the boldest and most venturous in trying to cure anything. With no exceptions, every patient told us he had been made well. Confidence in our ministrations as infallible extended to a belief that none could die while we remained among them. (de Vaca)

According to 'history, Estebanico and Dorantes were not as prominent as healers as de Vaca was – a big contrast to Lalamis story. This once again shows the power struggle between Mustafa and Cabeza that Lalami has created and tightened.

The genre historical fiction, which *The Moors Account* belongs to, has become more and more popular, and also in the academic world (Mitchell and Parsons 1). Topics that researchers in historical fiction look into are mainly how the author creates historical meaning, the variety of historical sources that the author uses, and how different literary techniques are being used (Mitchell and Parsons 2). Since the beginning of the 20th century, historical accuracy has been an important element in the historical novel, but now this is being put into question. Historical fiction is not historiography, but fiction, and should not

primarily be used to educate history (Mitchell and Parsons 3). The mimetic part in historical fiction has been abandoned, and instead the focus has been put on challenging representations in history: "historiographic metafiction is more concerned with representing the process of historical representation than with reconstructing the past" (Mitchell and Parsons 3). Through rewriting history writers can challenge the existing representations, and also show how untrue these representations have been (McLeod 2-3). This leaves us with *The Moors Account*– a novel not primarily about the actual events of a Spanish expedition to North America, but about the history, story, that possibly never made it to our tables. Lalami choosing to retell history, rework literary works, and being allowed to do so, is a step towards increased plurality. As Mustafa says: "Now the idea that there was only one set of stories for all mankind seemed strange to me" (*TMA* 276).

Although mimicking is not, as we have established, the important part of writing historical novels, Lalami has still aspired to write this novel in the same style as a 16th century travelogue. She claims to have used morphology that was used back then, but also is in use today, as to make the novel comprehensible (Lalami). The most striking example of her authentic ambition is how no quotation marks are used during dialogue. She "removed quotation marks because the conceit of the novel is that it is a manuscript written by an Arab traveler, and Arabic manuscripts of that era did not use quotation marks" (Lalami). This can be seen as a wish to create intertextuality, and connect this piece of text to others within Arabic literary history and tradition.

Lalami has thus been the listener to Cabeza de Vacas tales at first and then, according to storytelling tradition, she has become the teller of the tales herself, or rather, created the narrator Mustafa. As a teller to her new listeners, the readers, she chooses to change the stories, and these changes can have arisen from new knowledge and ideologies, which will be further discussed in the next section.

A Story About Post-colonialism

Already before *The Moor's Account* was published, Laila Lalami's authorship and literature was subject of post-colonial analysis: Elboubekri writes that Lalamis literature was chosen

because of “the urgent demand in diaspora studies to listen to the invisible underground voices from within marginalized exiles or minor writers who largely make up postcolonial literature” (251). Post-colonialism is therefore a suitable literary theory to use in order to better understand Lalamis *The Moors Account*. To apply post-colonial criticism is to look away from Universalism and the thought that one work can depict everything human. A Universalist approach is impossible, as the white Western part of the world historically has had the upper hand and has set the norms for humanity (Barry 192). Even though we now live in a world that has left colonialism, a post-colonial world, there are still traces of the major Western colonialization.

Post-colonialism as a literary theory emerged in the 1990s, but the complex of problems that post-colonialism presents had been around earlier than that (Barry 191). One of the most prominent scholars in the field was Edward Said, who in 1978 with his *Orientalism* put forth the claim that the Western world has treated the East, or the exotic *Orient*, as a “contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (Said 2). It is regarded as *the other*, that which the West is not, and also inferior to the West (Barry 192). The West “make out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom or type” (Said 86). Saids work paved the way for post-colonialist theory, handing it useful terms such as ‘the Occident, which is another word for the Western world (Said 3).

Laila Lalamis Morocco was a colony between 1912 and 1956, the so-called French Protectorate (“Morocco”). Lalami is thus writing from a post-colonial perspective, and through this book, she sheds light upon a world where some people have been put in the periphery and been wrongfully depicted through giving a historical person his rightful voice back. *The Moors Account* demonstrates the struggles of being *the other* – Mustafas skin color, his language, his customs, and his religion are all points in the novel where he experiences alienation. The fact that he his enslaved only intensifies the contrasts between oppressor and oppressed.

One of the most apparent motifs in the novel is the relationship between Mustafa and Dorantes. They start out as master and slave, where Mustafa describes his place as “one step behind him, always in his shadow” (*TMA* 41). This can be seen as an allegory where

Dorantes represents the Occident and Mustafa the Orient. The Orient is forced to stay in the shadows by the Occident, and is not let out into the illuminating sunshine. Once Dorantes and Mustafa go deeper into the unknown lands of southern North America, they leave Western civilization, society and norms behind. During their ten years together as outsiders, as *others*, in a group of Native Americans, the existence of an Occident versus an Orient disappears, and they become equals. But as soon as they have been found, norms and ideas from the past make their way back to Dorantes. In the end he even practices ownership of Mustafa again and sells him. As Mustafa expresses it:

> [...] Dorantes and I had slowly reprised our old relationship. Once again, he was standing in the sun and I had to retreat in his shadow. Once again, he was the speaker, and I was the listener; he was the decider and I was the supplicant. Once again, he was the master and I was the slave. (*TMA* 294)

Mustafa identifies himself with silence repeatedly. As a boy, he assumes the role of an observer through remaining quiet: silence makes him invisible and gives him an opportunity to listen to those who speak (*TMA* 35). In contrast to this, Mustafa as a narrator of stories to the reader is loud and present. He was once quiet, that is, he was once Estebanico, a person lost in history, but he is now vividly in our minds as Mustafa – the storyteller instead of the listener. But the silence that Mustafa has endured does not necessarily need to be an oppressed silence. Discussing the works of J.M. Coetzee, Mullins says that silence can be a weapon towards oppression. According to Mullins, there is nothing that says that Friday in Coetzees *Fo*e, a rewriting of *Robinson Crusoe*, is not physically able to speak and communicate, "but that he uses his silence as insubordination to protect the only thing that he has: his (hi)story before Cruso and Susan Barton reached the island, or more bluntly, before colonization" (9). Similarly, Mustafa is reluctant to tell his personal story, and regards it as his only belonging, and silence is what keeps his sense of self-worth. As discussed, Mustafa chooses to speak in the end, which actually is the first step towards a dissolution of Dorantes oppression. The ability to choose when to speak and tell stories is a tool Mustafa uses. The combination of Mustafa receiving a voice by Lalami, and simultaneously being careful about overusing it, is an interesting balancing act.

Barry presents four essential aspects of post-colonialism (193-195). The first one is

the previous lack of awareness of how non-Europeans have been represented as *the other*. In the novel, Castillo describes Moorish women as furious and hot-tempered, and says in a passing "you know how women are, especially the Moorish ones" (*TMA* 190). This resonates with the idea that *the other* is immoral (simply because he or she is not Christian) and needs to tame his or her temper (67, 309). Dorantes also questions Mustafa by telling him that is only a Moor (*TMA* 190), reducing him to his ethnicity and otherness. Likewise, his stamp of slavery is as difficult to get rid of as is his stamp of race; one of the Spaniards accuses him of being a thief, as he is the only slave among them, to which Mustafa replies "I am no more slave than you" (*TMA* 202). Despite all this, it is not only Mustafa who represents *the other*. The Native Americans are also viewed as immoral, exotic and lesser people, and become oppressed by the Spaniards when they for example are taken prisoners and hostages. As stated, it is only around the fire, telling each other stories, that the foreignness is lost as the stories reveal peoples many-sidedness, and Europeans and Americans can unite.

The second aspect of post-colonialism is the way language is used. As the colonized world has been forced to embrace English and use it as a new language, but never really felt like it is their own "linguistic furniture", their language is tainted and to "write in it involves a crucial acquiescence in colonial structures" (Barry 194). Although Mustafa chose slavery voluntarily, for economic reasons, he is still forced to adjust to a new language use. Being coerced to convert from Islam to Christianity, he is thrown into a culture and a language that is unfamiliar to him. The importance and power of language is evident in the novel. Mustafa learns that a river in Spain has an Arabic name, and that name makes him calm and delighted because it is something familiar to him, but it also reminds him that he is not at home and about his humiliation of being a slave (*TMA* 107). When in America, the explorers rename existing lands, villages and rivers in order to exercise power, and also rename Mustafa Estebanico, a diminutive of Esteban, in order to recreate him as they wish:

> Estebanico was the name the Castilians had given me when they bought me from Portuguese traders – a string of sounds whose foreignness still grated on my ears. When I fell into slavery, I was forced to give

> up not just my freedom, but also the name that my mother and father had chosen for me. A name is precious; it carries inside it a language, a history, a set of traditions, a particular way of looking at the world. Losing it meant losing my ties to all those things too. So I had never been able to shake the feeling that this Estebanico was a man conceived by the Castilians, quite different from the man I really was. (*TMA* 7)

Mustafa responds to the Spaniards use of language through staying firm about using his own words for certain things. He uses the Islamic calendar of Hegira, and unapologetically refers to place names and objects in their Arabic form: the *guenbri*, the *msid*, the *souq*. Laila Lalami challenges our English-speaking norms in a sense, making the reader at times the one left out, not understanding some words and not being given an explanation for them. That the reader (probably) hits a minor language barrier, adds a layer of understanding to the language confusion that takes place in the novel between Mustafa, the Spaniards and the Natives.

A third aspect of post-colonialism is the cross-cultural literary heritage. Countries that have been colonized have been taught a Western literary canon, and their own literature is then at risk to disappear. When post-colonialism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, writers shifted their attitudes towards maintaining their non-European literary forms. According to Barry, most post-colonial literature has undergone this shift (195). First, there is the *Adopt* phase, which is when writers accept and adopt the Western literary form. The next phase is to *Adapt*, which is to let this adopted form now revolve around topics and subject matters connected to the colonized country. Lastly, there is the *Adept* phase, when writers have become adepts, ignoring European literary norms and gaining independence (Barry 195). If we look at these three stages as instead different elements *The Moors Account*, we first see that Lalami chooses to write in English, even though her language and especially Mustafas language is Arabic. She has first adopted a Western language, but then she adapts it and forms it according to her own stand point. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that despite the fact that African literature of today has been crafted from an educational system with colonial and Western norms, African authors and literature have still been influenced by the oral tradition of storytelling (“African Literature”). Lalami is equally influenced when she is using storytelling as a literary tool: she is changing ‘chapters into ‘stories, rewriting a

Western travelogue from the 1500s into an Arabic *Scheherazade*.

Barry speaks not only of language hybridity but also of hybrid identities, which is his fourth and last aspect of post-colonialism. To have a hybrid identity is to feel like your identity is doubled and/or unstable (195) – as if you have a foot in both camps. Mustafa is a textbook case of someone with a hybrid identity: he is even wrestling tripled identities, being Arabic in the conquistadors eyes, Spanish in the eyes of the Natives, and also eventually belonging to Native American culture, where both Europeans and Americans view him as more culturally adapted to the American lifestyle than the Europeans are. It is not a coincidence that Mustafa falls in love with a Native woman who like him is regarded as an outsider; he had done the same in Spain when he fell in love with a slave who shared his situation.

Mustafa is expressing confusion about his state as he says "all of the Indians in these parts were probably convinced by now that the white aliens who had come to their territory were flesh-eating monsters. And where did that leave me, a black man among these white men?" (*TMA* 193). His hybridity is not only a negative thing, however – he uses his feeling of otherness to distance himself from the European treatment of the Americans. His otherness also serves as a gateway to befriend the Natives, as he looks different from the Europeans and is separated from them. In Cabeza de Vacas *La Relación*, Estebanico is similarly used as a tool to communicate with the Natives:

> We reached them after vespers, to find one Indian. He fled when he saw us coming. We sent the Negro after him, and the Indian stopped when he saw only a lone pursuer. The Negro told him we [w]ere seeking the people who made those fires. (de Vaca)

> To maintain this authority the better, we seldom talked with them directly, but made the Negro our intermediary. He was constantly in conversation, finding out about routes, towns, and other matters we wished to know. (de Vaca)

Gordon observes that the historical Estebanico was described in different ways in the existing texts written by explorers coming to New Mexico after the Narváez expedition, who had talked with Natives about the four men who traveled through their countries.

Some texts describe Estebanico as simply one of the Christians, while some single him out and characterize him, often as a hero (187). Gordon argues that these differing depictions are a result of how the writers wanted to be seen (196). Estebanico was either placed in the category of Spaniards or the category of Native Americans, or "by underscoring or erasing his blackness, whether to associate him with other subaltern or to segregate him textually based on race or class" (Gordon 196). The historical Estebanico was evidently also a person with a fluid and hybrid personality.

How does Mustafa handle his hybridity? First, as previously mentioned, storytelling serves its function as a way to form Mustafas identity and to gain a sense of integrity. It helps him cope with the oppressing elements of being a slave without a free will. In the lower decks on the ship during his journey to Spain and a life as enslaved, people who share his situation tell each other stories, forcing them to leave their current reality and into a new, better one. Also, when Mustafa sees a Christian picture of Virgin Mary, he experiences the figures in the picture as "removed from our untidy and disgraceful world, engaged in their own story, unconcerned about the scene unfolding beneath them" (*TMA* 108). Secondly, he puts most of his focus on his home country Morocco, as has been discussed above. According to Elboubekri, Laila Lalami has portrayed the difficulties of migrants living in diaspora and how identities are in "eternal quest for home" in her previous writing (251). Elboubekri declares that Lalamis characters do not necessarily have to deny their roots in order to create themselves a home in their new country. A person in diaspora is in a "plural positioning" and can raise him- or herself above geographical limitations (263). This resonates well with how Lalami has portrayed Mustafa – in the end he comes to terms with the fact that he will not return to Azemmur. He is still there in his mind, but accepts that he will not come back, and hopes that his future child might be able to travel in the opposite direction of Mustafa one day and go back to Morocco (*TMA* 318).

Conclusion

In *The Moors Account,* Lalami uses the method of traditional storytelling in order to show how different interpretations of one reality can create a more diverse society, and thus

prevent wrongful representations and depictions to rule. To retell a story in a new way is to bring in subjective aspects of it, and this is what Laila Lalami does when she rewrites Cabeza de Vacas text. The multi-voiced aspect of storytelling is one of the reasons this novel belongs in a post-colonial discourse, together with the topics of for example slavery, colonialization, alienation and cross-cultural experiences. As this essay has demonstrated, Lalami has in her novel shown that storytelling is far from primitiveit has many complex elements to it in regards to subjectivity, the self and group dynamics, and it puts our thought of literature and the 'copyright of a story in question. As discussed, Lalami has incorporated African literary tradition into a Western discourse in an act of post-colonial reappropriation, and shown us that storytelling can be used as a powerful literary tool also in our post-modern world.

The thesis of this essay confirms Elboubekris research where he claims that Lalamis authorship can be seen as a project that reconstructs what has been left out in history, and " […] in the act of unearthing micro-stories, the author tends to envision reality in a better way by filling up the gap of absences and by representing alternative histories to the dominant one […]" (251). This links up with *The Moors Account*, creating a uniting force behind Lalamis authorship. With this novel, she elevates a voice that was once unheard, envisioned through the tradition of storytelling, and celebrates the possibility of lifting up subjectivity and other realities through rewriting history.

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