AMPHIBIOUS STORYTELLERS IN LEO AFRICANUS AND THE MOOR’S ACCOUNT

Exiles and nomads as bicultural humanists

Mahmoud Abdelhamid Mahmoud Ahmed Khalifa

Submitted date: 25 April 2023; Accepted date: 8 June 2023; Published date: 14 July 2023

Abstract: This article discusses the traces of two Early Modern Arab figures dramatized in The Moor’s Account (2014) by Laila Lalami and Leo Africanus (1992) by Amin Maalouf. Marginality, nomadism, and humanism are dramatized in the lives of Mustafa Al-Zammouri/Estebanico a black Arab from Zammour taken as a slave and sold to a Spanish conquistador who joined the Narváez Expedition and Leo Africanus/Alhassan Alwazzan who was captured by Spanish pirates and sent as a gift to Pope Leo X (1475–1521) around the same time. The lives of those two Early Modern Arab travelers provide the flesh for a bicultural humanism that avoids jingoistic nationalism that is centered around ideas of the canon that excludes narratives and texts from “the other world.” Bicultural humanism, I argue, is a unique space where both Maalouf and Lalami exercise their talent of recovering the lives of the silenced other and in doing so, challenge Orientalist stereotypes by creating dynamic narratives of Arabs and Muslims as complex nomad characters not essentialized violent multitudes enraged at Western modernity.

Keywords: Bicultural Humanism, Amin Maalouf, Laila Lalami, Leo Africanus, Renaissance, Amphibious storytellers, Mustafa Al-Zammouri

Bicultural humanists

Laila Lalami and Amin Maalouf are notable for writing back to the center from a humanistic point of view, while remaining aware of the highly charged context in which they write – a context where theses about the inevitable clash of civilizations were already being propounded. In an article entitled “The roots of Muslim rage”
published in the highly influential American Magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly* (Lewis, September 1990), renowned Orientalist Bernard Lewis claimed that: “The struggle between these rival systems [Christianity and Islam] has now lasted for some 14 centuries. It began with the advent of Islam, in the seventh century, and has continued virtually to the present day” (49). In the context of the Orientalist discourse spearheaded by Bernard Lewis in his writings on Arabs and Muslims, Lalami and Maalouf critique that narrative of civilizational conflict by arguing that an understanding of intercultural contact can be used to make a different take. I will argue that the lives of Leo Africanus and Estebanico problematize notions of home, travel and exile and develop a critical bicultural nomad capable of observing and exploring the other from a non-essentialized non-conflictual vantage point.

Maalouf and Lalami, residents in France and America respectively, reach back to historical figures from the Early Modern period to make their point. *Leo Africanus* (Maalouf, 1992) and *The Moor’s Account* (Lalami, 2014) are two novels that fictionalize historical figures and position them as witnesses to their worlds. In this way, the past is deployed strategically as a means of commenting on current events. Leo Africanus is represented as an Arab-European figure living at the heart of the Italian Renaissance – someone who may have criss-crossed Europe and its cities. Estebanico, an Arab slave who took part in Spanish “discoveries” of modern-day Florida, is of North African origin, like Laila Lalami herself. So, although marginal and nomadic, Leo Africanus and Estebanico integrate themselves into their European context and are arguably the reverse of the Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as “enraged” at Western modernity. The conflictual model of Orientalism is thus challenged. The binarism between Arabs and Muslims and the West fails as an explanatory category and with it the whole edifice and constellations of Orientalist discourse.

The presence of Leo Africanus, a Muslim judge and emissary for the Sultan of Morocco at the heart of the Italian Renaissance in 1520 is noteworthy. Around the same time, there is the less well-known figure of Mustafa Al-Zammouri, captured by the Portuguese in 1511 and baptized Estebanico. He is considered the first non-Indigenous person to set foot on what is known today as Florida. Leo Africanus was taken captive by European pirates in the Mediterranean in 1520 and Al-Zammouri was enslaved in less clear circumstances. Autobiographical notes can be gleaned from the work written by the historical Leo Africanus entitled *The History and Description of Africa: And of the Notable Things Therein Contained*. While the life of Estebanico is sparsely referred to in the work of De Vaca entitled the *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition* where Estebanico is referred to as an Arab and as a Moorish slave.
That presence of Leo Africanus/Alhassan Alwazzan and Estebanico challenges the mapping of Orientalism. Orientalism is premised on a supposed ontological difference between Arabs/Muslims and Europeans and Americans. This underpins an “Us versus them” rhetoric common to Orientalist discourse. Amin Maalouf in the introduction to his book *In The Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* argues that

> What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?

(Maalouf, 2001: 1)

The multiplicities of identity that cannot be pinned down to one geography and culture challenge the binarism that denies the multiple identities carried by people and developed by travelers and nomads as they go. Identity is not a given, it is an accretion. Islam has been a habitus for that sort of multiplicity. Maalouf explains that

> From the outset, and ever since, the history of Islam has reflected a remarkable ability to coexist with others. At the end of the nineteenth century the population of Istanbul, capital of the chief Muslim state at the time, contained a majority of non-Muslims – mostly Greeks, Armenians and Jews. Could we imagine Paris, London, Vienna or Berlin, at the same period, with a good half of their population made up of non-Christians, whether Muslims or Jews? Even today many Europeans would be shocked to hear the muezzin’s call to prayer floating out over their cities.

(Maalouf, 2001: 56)

Maalouf is aware of the destructive urge of the construction of a single undivided identity and uses it as a tool of war. That is why he celebrates in his novel what is hybrid, shifting, and negotiable and traveling. His reconstruction of Leo Africanus’s Arabic identity as well as his newly gained European identity is in a sense a personal argument about his life as an Arab Christian who lives between two worlds as is the case with Leo Africanus and migrants of all sorts.

Similarly, the work of Lalami struggles to prove two points: that there is a common humanity and common history whereby Estebanico, the Christened Arab “negro”, is part of American history, and that by fictionalizing a reconstructed version of his life she is able to give him an agency and full individuality that is denied
him in the only text that mentions him by name: the work entitled *Chronicle of the Narváez Expedition* by the Spaniard Alvar Nunez Cabeza De Vaca ([1542] 2002).

In modern times, Said has been a prominent exemplar of what he describes as an amphibious and bicultural life— one that gave him a unique perspective on two civilizations. Said was an oppositional storyteller who tells a story that reflects multiple perspectives, a story of in-betweenness and amphibians, “I have lived in the United States for the majority of my adult life, and for the past four decades I have been a practicing humanist, a teacher, critic, and scholar. That is the world I know best” (Said, 2004: 1). Most of all, Said always demands the right to narrate in the face of forgetfulness imposed on the marginalized by the powers that be. He elaborates:

> I grew up in a non-Western culture, and, as someone who is amphibious or bicultural, I am especially aware, I think, of perspectives and traditions other than those commonly thought of as uniquely American or “Western.” This perhaps gives me a slightly peculiar angle. For example, the European antecedents of American humanism and those which derive from or are thought of as “outside” the Western purview interest me a great deal.

(Said, 2004: 1–2)

Lalami and Maalouf court indirectly Edward Said’s theorization of critical bicultural humanism and the vantage point of the “amphibious” and the bicultural. They seek to rebut the Orientalist privileging of the Western “curiosity” about other cultures with the supposed lack thereof in other cultures: British American historian Bernard Lewis takes an Orientalist position when he argues that

> The age of the great discoveries which brought European exploration to the remotest parts of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, brought them also to the Asian and African, as well as the European, approaches to the world of Islam, and gave them new opportunities as well as new incentives to explore it. The intellectual curiosity of the Renaissance was soon extended to the great neighbor of European Christendom.

(Lewis, 2001: 101)

This linear and teleological worldview that presents the West as curious about others versus Islam as sealed off from other civilizations is disputed by Lalami and Maalouf. Historically, Alwazzan cum-Leo Africanus produced a compendium on the human geography of Africa that contributed to the Renaissance knowledge of other people. In a sense, it was an Arab Muslim from Morocco who put all his
experience and knowledge gained from his travels into a book that was written in Italian in the middle of the Italian Renaissance. As such, Renaissance itself was a hybrid act that is not wholly European. The Arab Muslim nomad has made a remarkable contribution to Renaissance Europe rendering the watertight claims of Western exceptionalism void. In the introduction to the English translation of The History and Description of Africa, Robert Brown makes it clear that Al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus, “taught Arabic – the most distinguished of his pupils being the Bishop of Viterbo, afterwards Cardinal Egidio Antonini” (xlv). This contribution to the teaching of Arabic and the writing of a historical work on Africa are accomplishments of a nomad and a traveler from an Arab Muslim heritage that debunks the putative exclusivism of the Renaissance. Furthermore, Brown continues Leo was a “man who was for nearly three centuries the sole authority on the geography of Northern and Central Africa” (xlviii). Therefore, by narrating “other” versions of history through fictionalizations of historical figures, Maalouf and Lalami challenge such Western narratives of the Renaissance as well as the modern narrative of the inevitability of conflict between Islam and the West.

The lives of Leo and Estebanico are such that the notion of home is decentred by the experience of travel, exile, and slavery. Exiles, nomads, and travelers develop a critical stance toward others and create a bicultural observer who stands at the borderline of things. The Early Modern period saw incessant traffic and trade of slaves, artifacts, and captives and the theme of displacement is a fertile one for the modern literary nomad where characters go with a mobile identity, crossing borders, and rethinking loyalties all the time as well, as argued by Harrington:

The nomad, on the other hand, is able to maintain an even more consistent distance since he or she resists “membership” to any nationality or group altogether and therefore occupies an advantageous position for observing and commenting on societal practices and beliefs from both the country of origin as well as the host country. The viewpoint made possible by a nomadic experience also allows one to see one’s own past and identity in a new and often revealing light.

(Harrington, 2013: 8)

The Early Modern period offers examples of nomadism where there are interstitial spaces that allowed the performance of a hybrid identity and the strategic use of amphibious storytelling. Though it is impossible to deny the dangers of peddling a hybrid identity at a time when concerns about religious purity and schism were rising, the life stories of Leo Africanus and Estebanico offer a stark example of the hybrid and nomad in those times and how they survived. They were
biculural humanists who embraced a world of multiplicity where identities are not watertight compartments of self-assurance that are ready to explode at the slightest provocation. The historical and fictional commingle in the two novels to offer bewildered and self-questioning characters who encounter the other as dynamic individuals and go-betweens of cultural hybridity. Their double consciousness of bestraddling two worlds allows them to negotiate the differences between those two worlds as they negotiate their marginality. These are individuals who through either dire events or capture undergo a transformation that brings them face to face with Western neighbors. This produces a reworking of their earlier selves to operate in the new context. They become amphibious.

Amphibious tricksters and strategic hybridity

Both Leo Africanus and Estebanico led lives that have been the subject of historical as well as fictional reconstruction. Bearing testimony or witnessing events is a technique used to tell the story of the subaltern. The Arab “negro” christened Estebanico was sold as a slave in the Portuguese vassal city of Azamour and transported to Valencia and then to a master who was on the failed La Florida mission. The Arab geographer Hassan Alwazzan/Leo Africanus was taken captive on his way back from Egypt to Fez and sent as a present to Pope Leo X. Both historical figures are depicted in their respective fictions as epitomes of the nomad to make an argument for the value of that quality in a world torn by wars between fundamentalisms. In having the fictional Leo Africanus relate his capture and imprisonment, Maalouf provides a description of a plausible world of a dialogue of civilizations. This is done in part through the endearing conversation Al-Hassan Alwazzan is allowed to have with his “visitor” who welcomes him when he was first captured and sent as a gift to Pope Leo on his way home to Morocco:

a man of art and learning is always welcome among Us, not as a servant but as a protege. It is true that your arrival in this place has taken place against your will and through means which We cannot approve. But the world is so made that vice is often the arm of virtue, that the best acts are often undertaken for the worst reasons and the worst acts for the best reasons. Thus Our predecessor, Pope Julius, had recourse to a war of conquest in order to endow our Holy Church with a territory where it can feel itself safe.

(Maalouf, 1992: 290)

Leo Africanus and Estebanico are median and hybrid which made it easy for both Laila Lalami and Amin Maalouf to argue for a world of tolerance and multiplicity
through a fictionalization of Estabanico and Leo Africanus. The life of Leo Africanus with its contradictions, transformations, and ambiguity suited the life theme of Amin Maalouf who was “born in Lebanon into a family of mixed religious loyalties and much geographical outreach” (Zemon, 2006: 9). There is an oscillatory character to the bicultural humanist. Leo Africanus is a case in point:

Le Léon de la Description s’installe dans la singularité, c’est-à-dire entre le particulier et le général, sans être tout à fait ni l’un ni l’autre. L’auteur est marqué par l’ambiguïté, oscillant entre l’Europe et l’Afrique, entre le christianisme et l’islam. Et le texte lui-même s’établit entre le texte purement savant et le texte littéraire.

(Zhiri, 1989: 65)

The historical Leo Africanus is an amphibious character oscillating between two worlds and two religions, Islam and Christianity, and his fictional counterpart in Leo Africanus by Maalouf is used to match the hybrid cosmopolitans of contemporary times.

**The subaltern and the wonderous**

The African explorer of Florida Esebanico behaved differently as he carried a subaltern identity devoid of any power, unlike his Spanish associates who wielded greater power by virtue of being free and Spanish. His slave status and his search for freedom allied him with the Native Americans. The natives did not write their own history and lost their battle even before it started. Yet Esebanico subalternizes them by talking about them and representing them and that brings us to the paradox resident in the representation of the subaltern, which is well expressed by John Beverley,

> When Gayatri Spivak makes the claim that the subaltern cannot speak, she means that the subaltern cannot speak in a way that would carry any sort of authority or meaning for us without altering the relations of power/knowledge that constitute it as subaltern in the first place.

(Beverley, 1999: 29)

The state of the subaltern manifested itself in many ways. Even when privileged, those subaltern nominal slaves like Leo Africanus in Early Modern Europe were constrained by the pull of power. Maalouf shows him struggling to articulate the
“Arab other” to his Western audience in a way that might circumvent the hostile discourse typical of the times. He manages to write apologetically about the Africans in his book *The History and Description of Africa: And of the Notable Things Therein Contained*:

Neither am I ignorant, how much mine owne credit is impeached, when I my selfe write so homely of Africa, vnto which countrie I stand indebted both for my birth, and also for the best part of my education: Howbeit in this regarde appeale vnto the dutie of an historiographer, who is to set downe the plaine truth in all places, and is blame-woorthie for flattering or fauouring of any person.

(Africanus, 2010: 187–188)

Leo Africanus is addressing an Italian audience and although he admits that by birth he belongs to Africa and that he received the “better part” of his education there, he is going to be unbiased in his treatment of Arabs as a way of proving his unbiased assessment. It is a self-defense of an amphibious who like the amphibian animals can survive by alternating between land and sea. They are adept at both. Leo because of his double loyalty that is divided between his Arab Muslim origins and his new Italian and Christian identity, tries to navigate both identities carefully at a time and a place in Europe were heresy was punished with burning at the stake.

Apart from giving agency to Mustafa/Estebanico as an Arab Muslim agent of mediation and go-betweenness, *The Moor’s Account* is a counter-narrative to the account of De Vaca. Events are told from and the point of view of Mustafa/Estebanico’s culture which lacks the racism and superiority with which Spaniards and conquistadors treat Native Americans. But the lack of a historical account from the point of view of the “Arab Negro Estabanico” (as De Vaca’s account describes him) gives *The Moor’s Account* the air of being a historical reconstruction rather than a fictional autobiography. Estebanico can also be viewed as a generic African as Robert Goodwin argues:

Similarly, the history of the Africans who served the Spanish Empire is not easy to write, because the sources were written by the masters and not the slaves. But, buried beneath the surface of the historical sources there lies a fragmentary, uncertain African-American history, and the subject of this book, Esteban, is one of the few examples of a sixteenth-century African slave whose achievements were so outstanding that it is possible to piece together his story from the contemporary Spanish documents.

(Goodwin, 2008: 6)
The history of the subaltern is always a reconstruction. To have lost your power to self-represent makes the process of recovery a piecing together of odd pieces, which is complicated by the lack of agency. The subaltern can speak only from the margins. There is no recoverable self prior to European contact.

**Representing the self: Natives speak out**

Leo’s *The Description of Africa* reflects his cross-cultural consciousness as he bestraddled two worlds: Africa (the subject of his book) and Renaissance Italy (to which it is addressed). Nomadism comes with a mixed bag of estrangement and multiplicity as the fictional Leo suggests,

> From my mouth you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and vulgar Italian, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none of them. I belong only to God and to the earth, and it is to them that I will one day soon return.

(Maalouf, 1992: 1)

Here the novel’s main claim is made clear. It is an invitation to embrace the multiplicity of the world – not via a facile cosmopolitanism, but through an acceptance (firm at times and volatile at others) of conflictual multiplicity. In his *History and Description of Africa*, Leo Africanus makes no secret of his amphibianism that he uses as a strategy to circumvent cultural difference and be more accommodating. Identity for Leo is a performative act of balancing on a tightrope:

> And so this bird, to auoide yeerely exactions and tributes, woulde eftsoones change her element. Out of this fable I will inferre no other morall, but that all men doe most affect that place, where they finde least damage and inconuenience. For mine owne part, when I heare the Africans euill spoken of, I wil affirme my selfe to be one of Granada: and when I perceiue the nation of Granada to be discommended, then will I professe my selfe to be an African. But herein the Africans shall be the more beholding vnto me; for that I will only record their principall and notorious vices, omitting their smaller and more tolerable faults.

(Africanus, 2010: 189–190)

The parable quoted above in the context of Leo’s discussion of writing about Africa to Europeans is an elaboration of Leo’s “amphibianism” which like the bird makes him evade the “tax” of being other. To escape the discursive purity that patrols statements, stories, and knowledge, Leo evades outright confrontation
through amphibious storytelling of strategic performance of culture and identity. As James Clifford argues, “Indeed, the currency of culture and identity as performative acts can be traced to their articulation of homelands, safe spaces where the traffic across borders can be controlled” (Clifford, 1997: 7). Clifford further elaborates that

such acts of cultural action, the making and unmaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales. Stasis and purity are asserted — against creatively and violently — historical forces of movement and contamination.

(Clifford, 1997: 7; original emphasis)

The whole Mediterranean on both sides can be considered a contact zone of Arab Muslim Turkish, American and European identities. Amphibianism and nomadism allows Leo Africanus to cross cultures against their centrifugal forces that pull toward conformity at a time when rising nationalisms were building religious and cultural consensus at the expense of minorities or those who fell on the outside of the new identity championed by rising empires. This amphibian ambivalence is used strategically by Leo Africanus/Alhassan Alwazzan and Mustafa Azamouri/Estebanico to avoid an essentialism that would work against the established consensus on identity. Was amphibianism a strategic way of coping with the ever-changing landscape of Alwazzan’s/Leo’s life? The answer is “yes” concludes Oumelbanine Zhiri in her study of Leo Africanus: “Jean-Albert Widmanstatter, dans sa préface aux Evangelia syriaca, dit que ‘Léon Eliberi’ (ainsi l’appelle-t-il d’après le nom latin de Grenade) a quitté l’Italie pour Tunis où il est retourné à la foi musulmane” (Zhiri, 1989: 33). (Jean-Albert Widmanstatter, in his preface to Evangelia Syriaca, says that “Léon Eliberi” (as he calls him after the Lain name of Granada) left Italy for Tunis, where he returned to the Muslim faith.)

The amphibianism of Hassan Alwazzan/Leo Africanus and Estebanico, shows in their self-fashioning and flexibility that suited capricious times which one time made them free men of outstanding position vis a vis power and other times where fortunes put them in the chains of a completely different civilization — an adversary one that encroached politically and militarily on both individuals. However, in the case of Estebanico, distancing techniques are used by Lalami to set the narrator off from his surroundings. These include his use of the Hejri rather than the Gregorian calendar, as well as his increasing involvement with the Native Americans, where he blends in much more easily than the white conquistadors. He is consciously aware of his subaltern status that brings him closer to the natives who suffered considerably at the hands of the conquistadors. In a sense, the
Spanish and Portuguese who occupied Azamour are the same ones who sent military missions to take over native cities in the name of the Spanish throne and Mustafa Azamouri/Estebanico’s forced conversion is similar to the forced conversions of the natives of America. That makes his religious beliefs a tempering component between the militaristic and bellicose Christianity of the conquistadors and the religions of the Native Americans. His beliefs show an apparent multiplicity that allows him to navigate the complex world of Spanish America easily moving from being a Muslim Moor to a baptized Christian slave and to a shaman trusted by the natives through his use of a mix of Arab, Spanish and Indigenous medical practices, Estebancio narrates that,

No matter how many times I explained that this was a simple cure that had been used in my hometown, people did not believe me; they thought I was being humble. And because I had succeeded where the Susola shaman had failed, my alienness became connected in people’s minds with my healing power.

(Lalami, 2014: 231)

The Moor’s Account writes back to the Spanish imperial center which privileged the account of Spanish conquistadors and would have discounted the narrative of the Moorish slave. Any potential Arabic narrative of the Moor is erased and absent because of the workings of power a slave cannot, by definition, write a report back to the King of Spain. That historical scarcity is used by Lalami to fictionally construct that erased slave narrative. Lalami uses historical sources and books that she lists at the end of the novel. In her account, storytelling is a domain of hope for Estebanico,

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.

(Lalami, 2014: 124)

Mustafa Azamouri’s storytelling is one way of making sense of the world and of leaving a legacy so that he might be remembered. It situates a desire for eternity in the narrative – a chain of narration that might well live on in his progeny. His story is not necessarily a reflection of absolute truth, but is an attempt to capture what he witnessed as a slave:

I tried to tell the story of what really happened when I journeyed to the heart of the continent. 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 of their glorious, magnificent colors, were somehow 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.

(Lalami, 2014: 320–321)

The postcolonial thinking behind writing back to the center by reaching to Early Modern times is defensible in the sense that religious and cultural marginality is not a new phenomenon connected to modern imperialism. It is a phenomenon that can be safely traced back to the Early Modern times including the 1492 “discovery” of the Americas by Columbus. Columbus acted as the new owner of the land and claimed it for the Spanish Crown and as a colonial administrator created colonies and built churches and tried to convert Native Americans to Christianity. The marginalization of the natives through the coercive imposition of the colonizer’s language, customs and religion is a classic case of colonialism. The slavery in which many natives in America and North Africa were reduced too because of the conquests by the Spanish and Portuguese is the reason why we find two Arabs transported to the middle of Spanish America and Renaissance Italy around the same time. This created the kind of amphibious nomads beloved of the postcolonial interest in marginality.

Mustafa Azamouri/Estebanico is well placed to witness in a manner dissimilar to that of the Spaniards. He is an interloper who is neither Indigenous nor Spaniard. He preserves a distance from both, as well as from the implications of power. While no discourse can be power neutral, that of the slave is full of nuances that escape the complete control of his masters. For Lalami’s Estebanico, the point of the story is not the search for gold that drives his Spaniard master; nor is it about conflict. Rather, he is a storyteller who soothes the subaltern and engages in all the activities of the contact zone. Estebanico occupies, “social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt, 1991: 34).

*The Moor’s Account* challenges the “master narrative” of Dorantes, Estebanico’s master. It provides Estebanico with a parenthetical existence between the Native Americans and the Spanish which reflects a divided consciousness and provides a character with a multi-perspective that desperately tries to locate versions of the same story side by side. The story told by Cabeza De Vaca in his account *Chronicle*
of the Narváez Expedition is a good example of the possibility of Europeans losing themselves and getting an identity that is more hybrid and heterodox and possibly more humanistic. The expedition fails but those who survive and live among the natives come up with a narrative that challenges the stereotypes not by directly challenging the masters but by writing an “other” story from the *marginalia*.

There are several moments of tension between the two parties where they express doubt about the stereotyping of Native Americans. Away from the centrifugal pull of the center, those Spanish conquistadores now surviving as slaves to the natives behave differently and almost integrate. The fictionalization of the expedition in *The Moor’s Account* adds more color to it by re-imagining the Moor’s point of view.

Leo Africanus’s fate is like that of Mustafa Azamouri: both were taken as slaves and were of use to their owners – one for his intellectual abilities and the other for his ability to deal with the native population. The narrator of *The Moor’s Account* is a slave who hails from Azemmor, a contact zone where people from different religions and cultures interacted. It was under the occupation of the Portuguese (1513 to 1541) and was the destination of many refugees coming from Granada to escape the persecution of the Inquisition. Muslim and Jewish refugees lived there in close quarters. As a location for a historical fiction, it allows exploration of the historical conditions of such contact zones. It seems that Mustafa Azamouri’s wish to become a notary has materialized but in another context, thousands of miles away from his original home:

> Señor Albaniz was also responsible for chronicling its progress for the next few months. His presence at this moment, our first encounter with an Indian nation, made me think of my father, who had dreamed of me becoming, like him, a notary public, a witness and recorder of major events in other people’s lives. I felt as though my father’s aspiration, which I had so easily and so carelessly brushed off many years ago, would never let go of me, that I would be reminded of it wherever I went, even here, in this strange land.

*(Lalami, 2014: 20)*

As an Arab black slave, both the historical and fictional Estebanicos are left stranded at the margins, with Lalami’s version witnessing events and narrating them conscious of the muteness imposed on him by his black skin and slave status. This status allows him to come closer to the other subalterns: the Native Americans. Although as a slave he has been fed the fear of Native Americans day and night by what he hears from his Spanish masters, he corrects those stereotypes when he encounters flesh and blood natives: “[t]he stories I had heard about the Indians had me expecting something incredible, fire-breathing jinns perhaps, but
these men looked harmless to me – especially next to the Castilian soldiers. Still, they were tied up and brought to Señor Narváez” (Lalami, 2014: 11).

Mustafa Alzamori/Estebanico takes it upon himself to write the history of the subaltern, not influenced by the considerations of power which affected the version of the story of the Native Americans in the “Joint Report” compiled by his other companions, all of whom hold official positions. He is a subaltern telling the story of the subaltern because he, unlike his other companions, is “neither beholden to Castilian men of power, nor bound by the rules of society to which the I do not belong, feel free to recount the story of what happened to my companions and me” (Lalami, 2014: 3). The first-person narrator of *The Moor’s Account* engages in autoethnography where he comments on his life and milieu:

> My upbringing in a trading town like Azemmur had instilled in me a love of language and, if I may be forgiven for this moment of immodesty, a certain ease with it. So I was curious about the Indians’ tongue, even though it had none of the clues that had been helpful to me when I learned new idioms: familiar sounds, a few words in common, a similar intonation. But, to my surprise, the governor nodded slowly, as if he understood the Indians perfectly and even agreed with them. (Lalami, 2014: 11)

There is meager information about the historical Estebanico, only a final sentence in the *Chronicle* of De Vaca, “The fourth is named Estebanico, black in color, Arab, native of Azamor in Africa” (quoted in Krieger, 2002: 301). He is referred to several times as “the Negro” throughout De Vaca’s account. This cursory mention is capitalized on by Lalami to move her hero from the margins of the story to become the main storyteller: a rival storyteller who challenges his marginalization and that of the natives among who he lived and for whom he was a main communicator with the Spanish.

*The Moor’s Account* stresses that storytelling is a way of healing for its narrator, as well as for others, as is clear from using cupping on the sick Indigenous chief while telling a story. The truthfulness of the story was no longer important to him. It was a means of letting out, a form of cure, and its literal correspondence to reality was no longer significant:

> I released the skin gently and started the process again. All the while, I told a story, to distract the Susola chief from the pain and also to entertain his kin, who sat all around us in the hut. Years ago, I said, taking some liberties with my tale for the sake of my audience, my father suffered from the same predicament. (Lalami, 2014: 230)
Estebanico is aware of how slavery has eroded his identity and that is why his narrative is an attempt at reclamation as well as narrative solidarity with the natives whose identity was eroded in likewise ways,

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.

(Lalami, 2014: 11)

He rejects taking part in the colonizers’ theft of Indians’ huts,

At once the soldiers took possession of whatever they could; each one jealously clutched what he had stolen and traded it for the things he wanted. I took nothing and I had nothing to barter, but I felt ashamed, because I had been made a witness to these acts of theft and, unable to stop them, an accomplice to them as well.

(Lalami, 2014: 7)

Although a powerless slave, he can take a moral stance and refuses to be an accomplice to the theft. As a Muslim, he could draw on Islam’s three-tiered ways of challenging wrongful deeds:

Whoever amongst you sees an evil, he must change it with his hand. If he is not able to do so, then with his tongue. And if he is not able to do so, then with his heart, and that is the weakest form of faith.

(Nawawi, 2014: 184)

This ability to engage in self-understanding that draws on his tradition is what enables Mustafa to distance himself from the Spanish colonizers and exercise compassion unhindered by the greed of colonization to see the perspective of the other.

*The Moor’s Account* reverses the colonial and Indigenous roles. The narrative moves from European explorers controlling and ruthless quest for gold to an attempt at survival. The conquistadors are domesticated by the Native Americans as their connection to the Spanish metropolis is severed by death and hopelessness. Cannibalism is no longer the stereotypical trait of putative Indigenous savages; it becomes a fact of the life for the conquistador whose desperation and desire to survive make them cannibalize some of their expedition members who died. The reversal is educative to those who survived the ordeal.
To sum up, the idea of home, of identity as stable and essential, is challenged by the authors treated above. The lives of Leo Africanus and Estebanico are transformed by slavery and mobility which introduce them to worlds where they have to translate between cultures and as such they become models of what travel does to identity. Travel transforms them into nomads, biculturally embracing a shifting ground that both protects them and turns them into cultural go-betweens. The fictionalization of historical figures is used by both Laila Lalami and Maalouf to challenge the static visions of Orientalism and introduce dynamic Arab Muslim characters in the middle of the Renaissance which has been characterized as a purely Western invention. Instead of an all-White history and characterization of the Renaissance, we have Arab Muslims and blacks side by side with European discoverers and intellectuals.

Notes

1. There is a disagreement about the exact date of his capture. This is argued in the introduction of the English Translation of Leo Africanus’s book *The History and Description of Africa* by the book’s editor Robert Brown: xlii, vol 1.

2. The spelling of the text does not conform to modern English spelling because it was translated into English by John Pory in 1660 conforming to spelling standards of the time.

3. The slavery and conversion of Estebanico is structurally similar to what happened to native Americans. “Around the year 1520, at the age of 17 (Amengual), Mustapha, a Moroccan young man, was kidnapped from his Moroccan hometown of Azemmour (near Al-Jadida/Mazagan), by a Portuguese slave trader and converted to the Christian, Catholic religion (Alchin). He was then sold in Seville to Andres Dorantes de Carranca, the duke of Bejar who baptized him Estevanico and made him his slave and personal servant. Carranca then took him with him in 1527 in the expedition sent by Charles Quint to explore and colonize the savage coast of Florida.” (169) quotation from Simour, Lhoussaine. “(De)slaving history: Mostafa al-Azemmouri, the sixteenthcentury Moroccan captive in the tale of conquest,” *European Review of History/Revue europeenne d’histoire*, 2013; Khalid Chaouch. Claiming Estevanico de Azamor in the labyrinth of Oriental/Western identities. *Middle Ground: Journal of Literary and Cultural Encounters*, 6 (2014).

References


Krieger, Alex D. *We came naked and barefoot: The journey of Cabeza de Vaca across North America*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.


