“Traveling Frames: Disorienting and Transgendering the Arabian Nights in Diana Abu-Jaber’s Crescent”

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In “Traveling Theory Revisited,” Edward Said considered “an alternative mode of traveling theory, one that actually developed away from its original formulation” (438) instead of becoming domesticated and assimilated into its new location. Charged with migratory and rebellious tendencies, this theory sets to work in driving neoteric aesthetic and political causes. This paper negotiates one such instance: the rescripting of The Arabian Nights and the figure of Shahrazad by Arab American women writers post 9-11, particularly Diana Abu-Jaber. In her novel Crescent (2003), Abu-Jaber both regenders and transgenders the storyteller’s (Shahrazad’s) voice and radically reconfigures the concept of the frame narrative. In so doing, Abu-Jaber problematizes Shahrazad’s perceived heroism in The Arabian Nights—one that ultimately capitulates to a traditional role of childbearing and childcare—and provides models of gendered Arab subjectivity away from the binary of oppressed women, and murderous and sex-crazed men. The Arabian Nights’ most widely remarked-upon formal feature, its frame narrative, “can be considered to be an […] example of the literary genre of mirror-for-princes” (Irwin 103). In this reading, Shahrazad weaves a complex labyrinth of frames (and frames within frames) both to unhinge and gradually instruct King Shahrayar away from tyranny and femicide. In over two centuries of analysis that exoticize and Orientalize the work as a whole, however, The Arabian Nights’ framing comes to be treated primarily as a widely-emulated aesthetic element whose secondary, thematic function is to entrap the bloodthirsty Shahrayar until such time as his desire for Shahrazad’s stories outstrips his desire to kill her. In other words, the frame as commonly understood gradually undergoes a shift of meaning, from an allegory of statecraft to pathologization of the Oriental tyrant. My paper considers the aesthetic and political implications of Abu-Jaber’s splitting in two the figure of the storyteller and the female heroine, gendering the storyteller male, and interpolating the storyteller’s voice into Crescent’s realistic chapters. Abu-Jaber’s reframing—in form and content—and regendering of The Arabian Nights to address post 9-11 Arabophobia and Islamophobia in the United States functions as a reflective and deflective set of mirrors that endlessly pressure pernicious and dehumanizing representations of Arab Americans.