

Recollecting History beyond Borders

Recollecting History beyond Borders:
Captives, Acrobats, Dancers
and the Moroccan-American Narrative
of Encounters

By

Lhoussain Simour

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P U B L I S H I N G

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Foreword	xi
Susan Nance	
Acknowledgments	xvii
Introduction	1
Chapter One.....	11
Reflections on Moroccan American Discursive and Cultural Encounters	
Writing Otherness: American Images of Morocco Redefined	
<i>Orientalism</i> and After: American Orientalist Episteme Reconfigured	
Chapter Two	41
Narratives Beyond Exclusion: (De)Slaving Moroccan Trans-Atlantic	
(Hi)Stories	
The Wretched of the Continent(s): The Odyssey of a Moroccan	
Captive in America	
Re-archiving Encounters: Unwilled Journeys of Moroccan	
Slaves Remembered	
Chapter Three	83
Moroccan Acrobats in Nineteenth-Century America: Acrobatic Spectacles	
between Cultural Curiosity, Ethnic Exhibition and Interracial Fascination	
Re-tracking the Beginnings and Itineraries of Moroccan Acrobats	
in America’s Amusement Culture	
“An Othello Forever”: Acrobatic Encounters, Interracial Connections	
and Moroccan Entertainment Experience beyond Borders	

Chapter Four	145
From Amnesia into Memory: Performing the Exotic through “the Fair Maidens of the East” in American Exhibitions	
Otherness on Display: Oriental Dancers, Amusement Industry and Orientalist discourse	
After The Exotic: Lost Voices of the “Midway Plaisance” Recovered	
Conclusion.....	191
Bibliography	199
Index	213

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- 2-1. Extract from Silvia's narrative, Silvia King (Marlin, Texas), "Ex-slave stories," *WPA Slave Narrative Project, Texas Narratives* 16 (2), from Federal Writer's Project, United States Work Projects Administration (USWPA), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
- 2-2. "Sundry free Moors' Petition," *Journals of the House of Representatives 1789-1790*, published for the South Carolina Department of Archives and History by the University of South Carolina Press, Columbia (20 January, 1790).
- 2-3. Abdul Rahaman, the Moorish slave (1762-1829. Drawing of Abdul rahman Ibrahim by Henry Inman (1828), the Arabic inscription reads "His name is Abd al-Rahman", from the *Colonization and Journal of Freedom* (1834).
- 3-1. Children peeking under a tent during a performance, Salsbury Collection, Buffalo Bill's West Show, Album 7 (1901), from <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection>.
- 3-2. Landolf Bluch, *The Washington Times* (1917).
- 3-3. The "Allah Ursols" troupe of Moroccan acrobats.
- 3-4. Hadj Nassar, Census Records and US Naturalization indexes of 1791-1992, from *New York, Index to Petitions for Naturalization filed in New York City, 1792-1989*, National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region, www.ancestry.com
- 3.5. Hadj Nassar's Application for Naturalization, from *New York, Index to Petitions for Naturalization filed in New York City, 1792-1989*, National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region, www.ancestry.com
- 3-6. Hadj Nassar's troupe of whirlwind acrobats and tumblers, *Variety* (1915).
- 3-7. Hadj Tahar on horseback, "Arab touring with Buffalo Bills Wild West Show," Salsbury collection, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, (1885-1901), from <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection>.
- 3-8. Hadj Tahar with his troupe of Moroccan Performers, Salsbury collection, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, call number NS-167, (1885-1901), from <http://digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/singleitem/collection>.
- 3-9. "English Acrobat boys detained by an Arab Company in Constantinople," *The Illustrated London News*, December 10th, 1881.

- 3-10. "The *Beni Zoug-Zoug* Troupe of Acrobats," *The Illustrated London News* (December 10th, 1881).
- 3-11. Bedouin performers in the "Garden of Allah", Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, New York (1910).
- 3-12. Moroccans at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, Centennial Photographic Collection, CEDC No. c062379, (1876).
- 3-13. Moroccan Furniture at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, Centennial Photographic Collection, CEDC No. c012379, (1876).
- 3-14. Emma Francis with her Arabian dancers, *Desert Evening News* (Saturday, April 2, 1910).
- 3-15. Moroccan acrobats with Buffalo Bill's show in pyramid building (1901), from www.delcampe.net
- 3-16. Moroccan snake charmer, from Kaufmann & Fabry Co. "Snake handler at the Moroccan Village," Century of Progress International Exposition (1933-1934), <http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm4/>
- 3-17. Hassan Ben Ali (upper right) and his Moroccan Acrobats, "Amusing Sons of the Desert," *The New York Clipper* (February 28, 1903).
- 3-18. Hassan Ben Ali's troupe of Moroccan Acrobats
- 3-19. Prince Mouly Ali Semlali, from Ghita Semlali's Album (1920)
- 3-20. Hadj Tahar, *The Billboard*.
- 3-21. "Slayman Ali imported and Manager of Arabian and Tumbling Novelties," *The Billboard* (December 26, 1914).
- 3-22. Slayman Ali's Troupe, *The Billboard* (March 24, 1917).
- 3-23. "An Oriental Manager," Sie Hassan Ben Ali, *New York Daily Tribune* (Oct. 15, 1911).
- 3- 24. Sie Hassan Ben Ali's certificate of citizenship, United States Federal Census
- 3-25. Hadj Ali Ben Mohamed witnessed to naturalization, US Passport Applications 1795-1925, from www.ancestry.com
- 3-26. Abdelkader Nassar witnessed to naturalization, US Passport Applications 1795-1925, from www.ancestry.com.
- 3-27. Sie Hassan Ben Ali's Theatrical Company, Manifest of Alien Passengers for the USA, Department of Commerce and Labor, form 500ID (August 9, 1911), from www.ancestry.com
- 3-28. Hassan Ben Ali's Troupe with the Ringling Brothers in 1915, from <http://www.art.com/products/p361712021-sa-i969567/troupe-ben-ali-ringling-brothers-1915.htm>
- 3-29. Hassan Ben Ali's *Too Zoo Nin* Arabian troupe, from <http://clancysclassics.blogspot.com/2008/10/sie-hassan-ben-ali-his-acrobatic-troupe.html>

- 4-1. Moorish dancers in the Moorish Palace, "In the Moorish Palace", from Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair* (1893).
- 4-2. "Woman in belly-dancing costume smoking and holding package of cigarettes," Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003671193/>
- 4-3. Moorish Palace in the Midway Plaisance, Chicago Columbian Exposition, from *The World's Fair Souvenir Album*, (1893).
- 4-4. "Dancing girls of the Midway," from F.A Rinehart, "Courtesy Trans-Mississippi Exposition Historical Society, Omaha, Nebraska" (1898).
- 4-5. Yamina, the Oriental Dancer, from Richard H. Barry, *Snapshots on the Midway of the Pan-America Exposition*, (1901).
- 4-6. "la Belle Rosa," from Richard H. Barry, *Snapshots on the Midway of the Pan-America Exposition*, (1901).
- 4-7. Oriental Village, from Kaufmann & Fabry Co. "One of the main entrances to the Century of Progress, the façade of the exhibit featured Islamic art and architecture," Century of Progress International Exposition (1933-1934), <http://collections.carli.illinois.edu/cdm4/>
- 4-8. Western entertainers performing Oriental personae, "Travelling entertainers working the county fair circuit, or locals having some exotic fun?" from <http://thenewfoundphotography.blogspot.com>, written on the back, "Margarie Greenwood-Dancer, Charlie Allen-Faiker, Hermann Percival-Juggler, Olga Lawitzky-Singer. Moorish Booth-Midway Plaisance,"
- 4-9. Deserted Moorish dancing girls, *St. Louis Republic* (December 13, 1904).
- 4-10. A Moorish lady in 1893, Buel J. W, *The Magic City*. St. Louis: Historical Publishing, North Illinois University (1894), from <http://gildedage.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-gildedage:21270>.
- 4-11. Fadma, the Moroccan dancer, from "Fits up a Moorish Hammam in the Heart of New York," *New York Register* (1912).
- 4-12. Princess Torquia of Morocco, from "Honors A Princess: Boston Society Pleased with the Visit of a Great Oriental Beauty," *The St. Paul Globe*, (Sunday, May 18, 1902).

FOREWORD

SUSAN NANCE¹

I am very pleased to write a foreword for this important book, for it rescues from obscurity the life experiences of transatlantic travelers whose stories are integral to our understanding of global modernity. In my own work, like Lhoussain Simour, I have always sought out historical actors whose lives have gone unaccounted for in our scholarship, and endeavored to do them some justice by approximating their stories and perspectives as accurately as I can. Even though there may be plenty about the past that is inaccessible to historians and other scholars, I have always argued that we have a responsibility to work at looking beyond the people and topics that become familiar research territory to tell the more elusive stories. It is important to ask about everyone in the past because that is where we will find new insights that shake up what we think we know.

To wit, fifteen years ago at the University of California, Berkeley, when I was doing my Ph.D. research on American engagement with the Muslim world, postcolonial theory was absolutely the rage. That tradition required any researcher of Western encounters with North Africa or West Asia to ask a predictable set of questions grounded in the idea that the weight of American and European representations of the Muslim world was so heavy that citizens of Western nations almost uniformly believed only those representations to be the one truth about “The East” as a supposedly unchanging, antiquated, violent, sexualized, and decadent place. Postcolonial theory and scholarship thus focused almost solely on documenting and critiquing all the misrepresentations as well as their authors. And, in those years, that postcolonial approach was the only acceptable starting point for any study of cross-cultural interaction between East and West. *The only acceptable starting point.* Approaches

¹ Susan Nance is a historian of communication and live performance and associate professor of US History at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. She is the author of *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and *Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and Business in the American Circus* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

that asked other questions examining human agency and conscious choice as drivers of culture, most scholars deemed politically naïve, or grounded in unexamined racism and some desire to speak for “the Other” and silence him or her just as Orientalist discourse did.

This point was made to me over and over. I found it in many books and a mountain of journal articles derived from Edward Said’s groundbreaking 1978 work, *Orientalism*, which lay at the root of the postcolonial scholarly tradition. It was made to me by a few frankly self-righteous audience members at some of my conference presentations about American engagement with foreign peoples and cultures. And, it was made to me by fellow graduate students who rolled their eyes when I explained my research assumptions: Certainly, Edward Said had pointed out to his generation of academics that Westerners (many of whom suffered from great denial about how their cultures exerted power over the rest of the world) routinely and arrogantly assumed things about Easterners that were shaped by imperial cliché. Still, I insisted, after over twenty years, maybe it was time think about asking some new questions. Perhaps it was time to ask how the people thusly represented had actually responded to the juggernaut of Western representation that was so ubiquitous and powerful for almost three hundred years.

I wrote my dissertation, and a book thereafter, which I called *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*. Over the intervening decade, postcolonial scholarship evolved. Academics began to admit that perhaps Orientalist discourses had been challenged at times, and that perhaps the subject populations were not as helpless as early postcolonial scholarship implied. Hence, in my book I sought out the identities and activities of people who interacted with dominant representations of the East by performing in Eastern guise. I gathered together these people for analysis whether male or female, native-born or foreign-born, wealthy or poor, professional or amateur entertainer, sincere in identity or “passing” either in jest or imposture. I wrote about American shoppers and travelers in the Middle East, members of wealthy but absurd fraternal orders like the Shriners, North African and West Asian immigrant belly dancers acrobats, pseudo-yogis and turban-clad fortune-tellers, as well as sincere converts to Islam and its indigenous American variants. This group did not consist of the scholars, literary geniuses, diplomats or painters to which most accounts of Orientalism attended, but adverse, work-a-day group of unconventional people who all enjoyed performing for a broad public audience.

Of the book, a number of North American and European reviewers said it was deeply researched and that they understood the point I was

trying to make. Yet, they argued, since I had not begun with Saidian theories asserting the power of subconscious discourse as the primary driver of that history and thus the supposed powerlessness of my historical subjects over their own cultural expression, my findings were not convincing. I was well meaning, they said, but either too naïve or reactionary to see that conscious choice and individual agency were irrelevant in the face of imperial cultural discourse that demonized the East.

In the Middle East and North Africa, my work was received very differently. I got reviews that praised my efforts to bring Arab actors out from the shadows of US history. A number of reviewers were delighted to note from my findings the degree to which American life was indebted to the cultural heritage of the Muslim world (even if some of the American interpretations appeared pretty uncouth today). I received messages from scholars abroad – including Lhoussain – who said they found many of the people, their experiences and motivations fascinating. They asked: How did you discover those belly dancers in Chicago? How can I find out more about this Turkish man, Oscanyan, that you found in 1850s Manhattan? Did you see more opportunity for research on these North African acrobats in the archives you used? That is, readers from the contemporary Muslim world found in my research evidence that people from their part of the globe who traveled to the US generations earlier were fearless, ingenious, and cosmopolitan people. They were not simply victims of imperializing discourse, but astute analyzers of it. Although they may have resented aspects of Westerners' interpretations of Morocco or Palestine or Egypt (and rightly so), the Easterners I discussed just as often manipulated those representations and turned them to their own advantage.

Then, one day I received a particularly memorable email. At the time I had on one page of my website an 1898 promotional photograph, "Troupe of Salim Nassar Bedouin Arabs - Hassan Ben Ali, manager" from the Nate Salsbury Collection of Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West at the Denver Public Library. The image showed nine men dressed as "Arab" circus acrobats, with Ali standing in the center of the shot. Posed staring confidently but with good humor directly into the camera, the men appeared with arms folded and their feet firmly planted in a masculine stance. The email came from a woman in the Midwest. "I think that the third man from the left in the photograph is my husband's great-grandfather," she said, "Do you know the names of these performers?" She said she had been doing some family genealogy work and was delighted to find this image, which she and her husband had been studying and showing to relatives. Unfortunately I did not have names of all the

men, and all I could do was refer her to the library record for it, and suggest archives at which she might inquire to find more information on those performers.

Having discovered these men, and many other immigrants, visitors and transient workers from the Muslim world in the US, and documented their agency in making their way through the complex cultural politics they found there, was the portion of my research of which I was most proud. At the same time, my greatest regret with that project was that my research just hadn't devoted enough research and pages to telling their stories. Clearly, many people wanted to know more about these historical figures and how they prospered.

That is why I am so glad Lhoussain Simour has written this book. His efforts to examine Moroccan travelers and entertainers in the US is crucial research that fills in many of the stories and ideas I was only able to raise briefly, while adding many more. He has also done something that I was unable to do: combine attention to those ever-popular Saidian paradigms with research in sources that reflect the experiences and worldviews of historical people from his global neighborhood, Morocco. That is, his work bridges the two sides of scholarly practice with respect to these kinds of topics. He shows us a way to move forward together regardless of what discipline we call home.

Lhoussain Simour brilliantly demonstrates that discourse and agency are two sides of the same coin of cultural power in global modernity. The trick to this, as Simour shows, is in asking about "the Other" by beginning from the premise that Moroccans very well knew that Americans routinely misunderstood North African people and cultures, even if they didn't refer to those misunderstandings as Orientalism, per se. As he puts it, he is out to document "how the Oriental 'Other' negotiates identity and difference when cultural paradigms of 'Self' and 'Other' are reversed."

And indeed, Simour finds some fascinating and instructive people whose stories exposed the degree to which Morocco has always been a transatlantic nation, and how cultural power and agency—with self and other reversed—actually functioned: enslaved but worldly "Moors" whose labor supported Spanish and later Anglo-American conquest of the Americas; Independent Moroccan women who traveled across the globe in order to work in shows in which they portrayed and simultaneously subverted the cliché of Muslim women trapped in the harem; Arab men who performed as the "brown threat" in shows of aggressive athleticism and cultural difference all the while living a quintessentially-American immigrant success story. Indeed, this past was usually more complex than

we realize, and many patterns of perception and representation existed, some of them contradictory.

Lhoussain Simour is the ideal researcher to write this book, reversing our gaze and looking in on the US from a North African vantage. Even when we use postcolonial theory to ostensibly rescue the voice of the other by deconstructing Western representations, how do we know that ours is a deconstruction those historical “Others” would have endorsed? This is a difficult question to answer with certainty. Still, Simour’s perspective is rooted beyond familiar academic centers and in his own shrewd evaluation of postcolonial and historical literature. And so he sees patterns and problems those of us in Europe or North America may overlook, but from which there is much to learn about the ingenuity and cultural power of the ostensible “Other.”

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few centuries, Western travellers to the Orient, including North Africa, have tried to give shape to both their physical and epistemological journeys by narrating their interactions with and experiences about remote and alien cultural geographies. But beyond this legacy of Western travel, there is also another equally interesting thematic concern: how the “Other” to the Western “Self” imagines, writes about and reflects upon his/her own travelling experiences to the Western world. This rise of texts in which non-Western writers, Moroccans as a case in point, represent their interactions with the other world beyond borders is perhaps a perspective missing from the now very rich and interdisciplinary field of the culture of travel. Nabil Matar, for example, has paid considerable attention to Moroccan ambassadors’ travel narratives about Medieval Europe;¹ yet, his project is limited to and restrained by canonical texts that deal with official visits of diplomats and envoys from the Muslim World to Europe. The other routes of non-official visits and journeys to the West, the encounter of ordinary travellers with the Western Self and their experiences outside national borders are also worth recovering, documenting and reflecting on. In fact, the history of cultural encounters cannot be inclusive without considering how the West was described by non-canonical voices as well, men and women alike. Thus,

¹ See Nabil Matar’s *In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Interestingly, Matar’s seminal work offers original translations from Arabic into English of two travel accounts of Moroccan ambassadors: Ahmed Bin Quasim al-Hajari’s *Kitab Nasir al-Din ala Al-Quawm al-Kafirin* (1611-1613) (The Book of the Protector of Religion Against the Unbelievers), and Mohammad Bin Abd al-Wahab al-Ghassani’s *Rihlat al-Wazir Fi Ifrikak al-Asir* (1690-1691) (The Journey of the Minister to Ransom the Captive). Both texts record the views and impressions of these 17th century travellers during their physical journeys to Europe. They also offer an interesting opening to interrogate the discourse of Self and Other from the perspective of the Moroccan travellers. Matar’s endeavour, though it mostly focuses on canonical texts of ambassadorial journeys, is a genuine attempt that seeks to respond to orientalist assumptions about Muslims’ complex lack of curiosity and interest in the Western Other as advocated by Bernard Lewis.

this book explores the mobility of Moroccans beyond borders and their cultural interactions with the American self and civilization.

Although a few Moroccans went to America during the earlier years of its history, Moroccan presence in the United States was generally limited until the mid-nineteenth century. Given the geographical proximity and access to Europe, it was historically more common for Moroccans to emigrate across the Straits of Gibraltar than it was for them to travel to America. Most Moroccans who went to America through different historical periods, with the exception of slaves making forced journeys, made a deliberate choice to be part of the American “melting pot” society. Taking daring journeys across the Atlantic offered Moroccans a distinctive view about American culture and civilization. They learnt English, adopted American lifestyles, wedded American women and established themselves as a vital population of the country but remained loyal to their culture, language and habits. In talking about a troupe of Moroccan performers, *The New York Clipper* states that

although they have had ample opportunity to become acquainted with American and European habits, dress and customs, they retain their Arab dress, for the street as well as the stage, face the East at sunrise and sunset, and eat no meat. Nor do they touch liquor in any form. They also adhere to the custom of removing their shoes, leaving them at the door of a house.²

This book is the beginning of an attempt to theorize and approach in an interdisciplinary way Moroccan images of America, and by extension intricate Oriental discourses about the West. It explores issues pertaining to cultural encounters between Morocco and America throughout various historical periods. It investigates the discursive and cultural implications of early Moroccan experiences in America, namely those of slaves, acrobats and dancing women who appeared in different American newspaper and magazine archives. One of the main objectives of my work is to draw attention to the previously unheard of texts and experiences of Moroccans who had visited America for different reasons and under various circumstances. It attempts to recover some undocumented narratives of Moroccan slaves, acrobats and dancing women whose less studied transatlantic experiences and journeys would help fill in some blanks in the history of Moroccan-American cultural encounters, contributing to a rethinking of the position of the Moroccan experience in America within canonical literature.

² “Hassan Ben Ali Imports More Arabs,” *The New York Clipper*, 1911, 5.

I start from the premise that, ever since the discovery of the New World, the Atlantic, like its Mediterranean counterpart, has always been an interesting zone of interconnections and a distinctly transnational space: a site of conflicting interests, a space of people's movements and demographic flows, and a complex terrain of cultural and historical intersections and interactions. If a good part of the Atlantic world was encompassed by Western imperial states, it is nonetheless far from being a homogeneous system of a unitary character. Many routes in the Atlantic were created and passed through by men and women from non-Western locales as well.

As a matter of fact, the Atlantic as a historical and geographical entity marked by considerable exchanges and interactions is replete with fascinating stories "that illuminate how a distinctly transnational space was created through the circulation of people, products, and ideas" from neglected geographies.³ The intervention of Moroccans in innumerable transatlantic routes undertaken willingly or unwillingly to the New World adds an interesting dimension to the already existing definitions that contributed to the shaping of the Atlantic paradigm. Enslaved Moroccans who made unwilling trips across the Atlantic, as well as Acrobats and dancers who were an integral part of the American amusement industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have often been neglected in the archives of history and have not so far been considered as a valid and pertinent subject of inquiry. Retrieving their narratives, staging them as real agents of history, hollowing out their individual stories, and taking their experiences critically offers new possibilities for the addition of cultural and intellectual dimensions of the Atlantic liaison to Moroccan history, which hitherto focused more profoundly on the Mediterranean in dealing with cultural encounters with the West.

This work is divided into four parts. To talk about Moroccan images of America does call for, if not demand, a preliminary reflection, though broadly sketched in this work, on how America views its Otherness. "Reflections on Moroccan American Cultural and Discursive Encounters" starts with a broad discussion of Moroccan American cultural encounters. It surveys American representations of Morocco in various cultural registers and attempts to give critical insights into issues about cultural encounters, namely how the American Self is involved in the narration of the Morocco of the Other at different historical junctures. The purpose behind this endeavour is not only to show an awareness of the various

³ Caroline A. Williams, ed. *Bridging the Early Modern Atlantic World: People, Products, and Practices on the Move* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 2.

textual and visual images initiated by the structures of orientalist discourse deployed to represent the country and its people, but also to delineate the historical involvement of America in the narration of orientalist discourse.

The reading of American/Western images of Morocco begs another discussion about Said's *Orientalism*. I shall reconsider some of its theoretical shortcomings, namely Said's less focused discussion of American orientalist episteme, and his failure to look closely at fair exhibits in the American context: how they contributed in shaping the nineteenth century American popular imagination regarding the Orient, and how the intricate discourses of performative displays helped in the orientalization and exoticization of the exhibited subjects and their cultures. I will also discuss *Orientalism's* failure to critically engage a discussion on the issue of native agency in an orientalized context: its limitation when considering how the Oriental Other of peripheral constructions acts and reacts when he/she is displaced to the Centre and what happens when the Orient attempts to move from the Other side of the paradigm to that of the Self.

"Narratives Beyond Exclusion: (de)Slaving Moroccan Trans-Atlantic (Hi)Stories" is written with the explicit purpose of undermining dominant historical paradigms and introducing neglected subaltern voices into history. It attempts to recover archival documents about Moroccan slaves in America whose transatlantic journeys have often been relegated to oblivion, and whose presence and contributions beyond borders have largely been unrecognized in historical writings. This is a lacuna that this second part hopes to fill as the stories of these slaves, fragmented though they seem to be, do not only offer new insights into Moroccan history and its connections with the Atlantic world; they also provide ample material that affords the rethinking, negotiation and reformulation of the ambiguous renditions of the past as envisaged by Western conventional historiographical writings whereby the textual fabrics of archival documents are read as ultimately true and final, and not as sites of representation that offer the possibility of retrieving the Other's overshadowed histories and stories. I invoke some rare and undocumented stories of Moroccan slaves who appeared in the New World across different historical periods. Through them, I seek to recover the physical itineraries of Moroccans who participated both as slaves and free men and women in the Atlantic history, understand the circumstances surrounding their narratives, and also peel back the layers of historical amnesia that eclipsed their figures as emblems of the early transatlantic crossing.

"Moroccan Acrobats in Nineteenth-Century America: Acrobatic Spectacles between Cultural Curiosity, Ethnic Exhibition and Interracial

Fascination” discusses the experience of Moroccan acrobats in America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The outgrowth of Moroccan acrobatic encounters with America in the nineteenth century was mainly conditioned by the sudden occurrence of world’s fair expositions in various American states. Following the lead of its predecessors during European colonial expansion, America adopted and introduced the idea of colonial villages in fair exhibitions for economic, political and cultural ends. Interestingly enough, such colonial villages became noticeable sites where the Other’s culture was displayed for visual scrutiny and where ethnic discourses about cultural identity and difference were interpreted and reinforced. Living exhibits and other collected curiosities from North Africa and the Orient were often put on display to offer fairgoers visual moments of exotic lands and people. Now the encounter with an Otherness that had once been imagined in textual productions became immediate, visually consumable and overtly performative.

Moroccan male and female acrobats often referred to in newspaper announcements as “sons of the desert” or “Bedouin Arabs” were part and parcel of such discourses. They made their appearances in the American amusement industry even before the fair exhibits were held. They took audacious journeys across the Atlantic seeking better life opportunities. They also crossed the Atlantic to experience their own version of the American success story through the American dream by capitalizing on their long-held tradition of artistic skills. They enthralled American audiences in the tent show business of Wild West shows and circuses, and left undeniable imprints of their artistic performances in the American entertainment industry.

This chapter raises issues pertaining to the representation of cultural otherness through acrobatic performances incorporated in various American entertainment sites of the time. International expositions, Vaudeville theatres, hippodrome stages, and various spectacle arenas associated with leisure activities developed discourses on performers and entertainers as ethnological living exhibits. These discourses were reinforced by the whole range of orientalist images which stemmed mainly from a history including a fascination with the exotic and sensual Other. Discourses on Moroccan Acrobatic performances in different American displays acquired ample cultural significance and shifted into entertainment spectacles of ethnic Otherness and exotic rarities used and abused by the Western entertainment industry to legitimize imperial discourses of identity and difference on the basis of ethnic exclusion and racial hierarchies.

My reading of the Moroccan experience beyond borders also attempts to unearth the early beginnings and re-track the physical routes and itineraries of Moroccan acrobats in the American amusement industry through the exploration of some American newspaper and entertainment magazine archives. The idea behind such an endeavour is to allow the voices of a number of gymnasts and circus athletes, who have hitherto been lost to us, to be heard through a resurgence of their acrobatic experiences and a recovery of their interactions with American spaces. These acrobats, most of whom were descendants of the *Oulad Sidi Ahmad O Moussa* brotherhood tribes in Southern Morocco, embarked on their journeys to Europe and to America looking for new experiences of discovery and knowledge and for the opportunity of better lives. They enthralled American audiences—men, women and children—with their novel spectacles of acrobatic agility and dexterity and introduced new forms of gymnastic acts for the first time in the American circus industry. A great number of women and children, both in America, Australia and elsewhere, and out of fascination with Moorish troupes of acrobats, started to join Moorish circuses as apprentices to learn about the craft.

The fascination of American women with Moroccan acrobats in fair exhibits and various entertainment venues created a new background of interracial connections. The “son of the desert” in tent shows, vaudeville theatres and hippodromes soon became enthralling, yearned for and sexually desired. American women felt the need to transgress cultural and racial boundaries and flow into the exotic Other wherein White sexual experiences would be inscribed. Such desire to be closer to the Moroccan Other brought intriguing stories of interracial romances and marriages between Moroccan performers and American women. These were not to pass unnoticed in newspapers and magazines of the time and were to some extent the other facets of the discourse of fascination that ran underneath the façades of the Moorish entertainment industry and the encounter with its American counterpart.

The captivating acrobatic performances of Moroccans in the American popular entertainment industry during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries left important evidence in archives, that is yet to be excavated and studied, about fascinating interracial stories and love connections such as those of Mouly Ali and Ingrid, Hadj Tahar and Julia, Slayman Ali and Marie Gillan, and that of Aschmar Siver and his American Bohemian wife. Moroccans in these cases are symbolic embodiments of exotic locales and sexual novelty that need to be explored by American women. American women, on the other hand, transgress sexual boundaries to experience Oriental fantasies and romances. Such romances turn the

Moroccan Other into a “fearful double”; an Othello forever, both as a site of desires but also as a potential threat to the construction of national identity.

American men and women were not only enthralled by the acrobatic performances of male gymnasts, they were concurrently attracted by the Moroccan dancing women’s spectacles as well. In fact, America was also a haven for Moroccan dancers during the nineteenth century fair expositions. In “From Amnesia into Memory: Performing the Exotic through the ‘Fair Maidens of the East’ in American Exhibitions” I look at the experience and stories of Moroccan and North African dancing women who appeared massively in various entertainment sites across the country especially in “Midway plaisances”, in the “Moorish Palace” and in the “Streets of Cairo”. The journeys and narratives of these women have largely been missing from the histories of Moroccan and American entertainment literature. Though a few scholars have undertaken extensive research on Egyptian and Middle Eastern dancers in American fair expositions,⁴ the North African ones are still frozen in historical archives. Recovering and documenting their experiences will certainly add an interesting discussion as to how transatlantic routes aided in shaping discourses about gender conventions, racial difference and aesthetic traditions, and how the discursive complexities of Self and Other are negotiated and rethought within orientalist practice.

These dancing girls’ shows with their myriads of Oriental and harem wonders soon turned into magnets for the Victorian Americans, and appealed to streams of visitors who were driven by strong desires to experience the erotic and exotic Other. Though they were often condemned on the grounds of indecency, excessive immorality and unsuitability by America’s Victorian standards, they appealed to American women who joined and contracted with travelling Moorish troupes of dancers to become dancers under various Oriental names in amusement sites during international fair exhibitions. For example, the little narrative of Mrs Mildred Scott of Chicago who deserted her husband to appear as a dancer in the “Moorish Palace” and in the “Streets of Cairo” is a remarkable case in point. Moorish dancing women as archetypal symbols of liberation in world’s fairs started to be imitated and their “danse du

⁴ See Amira Jarmakani’s *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Susan Nance’s *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (North Carolina: The North Carolina University Press, 2009); Zeynep Celik’s *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth Century World Fairs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

ventre” became reproduced in various amusement sites. The fluidity of feminine expression through dancing, the personal and sexual liberation, and the potential promises for self-emancipation that many women of the time felt were manifest in Oriental spectacles stimulated the interest of spectators from various social backgrounds who aspired to transcend the rigid Victorian codes and assert their sexual roles.

The presence of Moroccan and other North African dancing women in Victorian America is emblematic in unsettling the conventional definitions of Oriental female roles and in destabilizing the American Victorian model of femininity. These professional artists made daring journeys across the Atlantic and within the host country, spoke English and moved as free agents who embodied the spirit of travel and mobility, adventure and exploration, curiosity and fascination. The gender dimension of the travelling troupes of artists and gymnasts in America bestows the Moroccan experience of encounter with its cultural Other with powerful discourses that challenge the epistemological fixities of orientalist discourse and Western paradigms on identity and difference. After all, their stories are instances of individual experiences, but also very suggestive in terms of the subversive potentials they offer. They give the possibility of conceiving of mobility, individual liberation and curiosity as an Oriental discourse with various cultural implications. Female dancers, gymnasts and managers, as in the cases of Lalla Rokh, the manager of Torquia’s troupe, Najat Amburg, Fatima Tajwar, Masouda Bent Hadji, Zahar Ben Tahar, Fadma, Zahra Kader and many others, act out as counter voices that disrupt the orientalist ideology of Oriental women as absolute signifiers of confinement, submissiveness and silence.

The first part of this chapter looks at the encounter of Moroccan and North African dancing women with the American Self within the historical and cultural contexts of American fair expositions. Oriental live performances of belly dancing in midway plaisance were powerful enough in gratifying the audiences’ curiosities through the revival of the complex discourses about Oriental dancing women as epithets of harem life, sensual odalisques and sexual fantasies. Such eroticized and sexualized representations found their ample expression in oriental spectacles of the belly dancing women and became visually immediate and performatively real on various stages. I start by invoking the intricate discourses that weave through the facades of amusement shows in the midway plaisance to highlight how the myth of the Orient found its aesthetic expression in various Oriental dancing spectacles. Through the recovery of some of the dancers’ narratives in newspaper archives, I highlight how orientalist episteme, Victorian morality and amusement industry coalesce to produce

profound ambivalences and contradictions about dancing women and their Oriental-styled dancing shows. Underneath, popular fascination with the figure of the dancing woman was powerful enough in redefining the domestic space and in subverting the patriarchal discourse in the Victorian context. American women saw in the “fair maidens of the east” free subjects who embodied narratives of success, emancipation, self-independence and progress, and in their dancing a new mode through which American femininity and sexuality were to be negotiated and defined.

The second part attempts to recover some Moroccan lost voices in the midway plaisance and to look at the experiences of the dancers themselves as “living exhibits” in America’s amusement enterprise. The stories of the dancers give insights into the complex issue of orientalism; they contest and disturb in many ways orientalist representations of Oriental women as ahistorical subjects whose mobility is restrained by harem confinements and patriarchal orders of Muslim societies. The journeys of these performers as individualized subjects, which should initially be viewed as part of an emancipation discourse, work against orientalist stereotypical discourses about Muslim women and disturb the notion of travel as an alleged Western practice as well. These dancing women also showed intense curiosity in the Western Other, civilization and modernity. Their stories offer an interesting background that interrogates Manichean dogmas and epistemologies about Muslims having historically lacked curiosity about the Christian Other. Retrieving forgotten narratives such as those of Moroccan female dancers opens new itineraries in history writing and offers not only new ways of negotiating the complex dynamics of representation in texts and in performances, but also important discursive venues for the understanding of the dynamics of high and low cultures in their asymmetries, collisions and predicaments.

CHAPTER ONE

REFLECTIONS ON MOROCCAN AMERICAN CULTURAL AND DISCURSIVE ENCOUNTERS

Writing Otherness: American Images of Morocco Redefined

This opening discussion about Moroccan-American cultural connections starts with a survey of American representations of Morocco in various cultural registers. It attempts to give critical insights into issues of cultural encounters, especially how the American Self is involved in the narration of the Other Morocco at different historical junctures. The purpose behind this endeavour is not only to show an awareness of the various textual and visual images initiated by the structures of orientalist discourse deployed to represent the country and its people, but also to delineate the historical involvement of America in the narration of orientalism. The reading of American/Western images of Morocco begs another discussion of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. I shall reconsider some of its theoretical shortcomings, namely Said's neglect of American orientalist episteme, and his failure to look closely at fair exhibits in the American context. *Orientalism* missed the chance to discuss world's fair expositions as cultural arenas that contributed in shaping the Victorian popular imagination regarding the Orient. The intricate discourses working underneath visual performances and displays helped in the orientalization and exoticization of the exhibited subjects and their cultures.

As a matter of fact, North African identities and histories have been elaborately manipulated by European cultural discourses ever since the civilizing mission first began. Misrepresentation has been a major trait of the West's portrayal of the Other in the archives of Western history. The distorted depictions in the whole array of images, textual metaphors and symbolic icons that were mobilized in cultural registers became necessary to ensure the West's maintenance and promotion of the binary division between Self and Other. This division, likewise, secured the continuation of fantasies and desires which were meant to keep "the oriental despot"

weak, submissive and subservient. Such images are still promoting stereotypes that are prevalent in a post-colonial era.

Like their European predecessors, Americans have also held romanticized and profoundly ambivalent stereotypical discourses about North Africa. These cultural stereotypes were frequently reflected in visual and textual representations and had a deep cultural impact on the American collective imagination. They also aided in the creation of powerful mental maps that marshalled irresistible images of the Oriental Other as decadent, alien and submissively docile in need of the White's protection and of America's "civilizing mission". In recent years, and with regards to America's cultural discourse on Morocco, Khalid Bekkaoui has asserted that "there has been an increasing interest in Western representation of Morocco in various genres."¹ The study of Moroccan cultures, thus, became fashionable through travel narratives, nineteenth-century American international expositions—where aspects of Moroccan life were displayed in what was known as a "Moorish Palace" or "Moroccan Pavilion"—and also through anthropological studies and academic writings. Such complex epistemological investments were not naive exercises concerning "concrete knowledge" of Morocco. They have contributed greatly to the perpetuation of orientalist thinking in various ways and have circulated false claims about Morocco and its people to assert the cultural and racial supremacy of the white Self.

American travelogues about the East in the early nineteenth century flourished in a considerable way. The interpretive aspect of these accounts was significant as authors expressed their shock in reporting on the natives' spaces and on the relapse of the inhabitants, while at the same time they offered exaggerated romantic images about the mystery of the land and its people. A very often overlooked nineteenth-century text about American encounters with Morocco is Mark Twain's famous eastbound saga *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) wherein the traveller offers his readers an account of his disembarkation in Morocco. What might have remained in the minds of the American reader is not only the author's sarcastic wit and cynical ironies—the size of Tangier shops being "about that of an ordinary shower-bath in a civilized land"²—but also the powerfully damaging etiquettes he attached to the natives who "lived in the rudest

¹ Khalid Bekkaoui, ed., *Imagining Morocco: An Anthology of Anglo-American Short Narratives* (Fez: the Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, 2008), 1. This book covers Anglo-American representation of Morocco in short story writing from 1874 to 1979. It has managed to locate and discuss some rare texts on Morocco by British and American writers.

² Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1869), 80.