

# Moroccan Perceptions of the United States

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*Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.*

**Mark Twain**

There is a literary tradition in the Arab Muslim world that allows Muslim travelers to write about their trips to foreign countries. Ever since the time of Ibn Battuta, the great Moroccan traveler and explorer<sup>[1]</sup>, many Arab thinkers and

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[1] Mohammad Ibn Battuta (1304-1368) was born in Tangier, Morocco. At the age of 21, he set out to perform pilgrimage to Mecca. This journey aroused in him the passion to explore the world. He travelled around 75,000 miles altogether-more than anyone else of that time. He went as far as Sumatra, India, China, Russia, the Maldives. He spent 29 years travelling from one place to another. When he came back home and told people about the countries he had visited and the experiences==

scholars have published books and articles to record their attitudes, adventures and experiences in the foreign places they have visited. To cite only a few examples, the Soudani writer Tayeb Saleh published his novel *The Season of Migration to the North* where he depicts his experience, as a young Arab student, in London. The Moroccan historian Abdelhadi Tazi also relates his reminiscences of his first trip to Paris, the City of Lights, which he referred to as “the fascinating capital” and “the city of action and benediction.”<sup>[2]</sup> The Egyptian scholar Amine Arrayhani visited the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century and recorded his impressions of New York as “a place of noise, stress and distress.”<sup>[3]</sup> About this literary tradition, in his *Travel Genre in Arabic Literature: A Selective Literary and Historical Study*, Fathi A. Al Shibihi writes:

The facility of the journey in the Arab Islamic culture, regardless of the patterns of articulation (whether poetic, literary, mythological, theological, or sociological), remains and continues to be, on the symbolic and metaphorical level, to paraphrase the critic Janis P. Stout’s conclusions, a venturing out, and a challenge to the temporal and spatial limits of existence, with new personal, sociohistorical, and universal realizations.<sup>[4]</sup>

In 1999, I had the honor to participate in a round table, held at University Ibn Toufail, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Kenitra, Morocco, to discuss Mr. Youssouf Amine El Alamy’s book *Un Marocain à New York* (in English *A Moroccan in New York*). It was an opportune occasion, on the one hand, to debate issues related to this long tradition of trip narratives and, on the other hand, to listen to several presentations that discussed Mr. El Alamy’s novel from different perspectives: social, historical and literary.<sup>[5]</sup>

== he had undergone, no one believed him. Fortunately, the Sultan of Morocco did. He had Ibn Battuta dictate his stories to his secretary. His book entitled (*The Rihlah*), *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, contains invaluable information about the different adventures he had undergone.

[2] The Moroccan newspaper, *Assabah*, Wednesday 05 August 2009, number 2899, page 6.

[3] A round-table at University Ibn Toufail, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Kénitra, Morocco.

[4] Fathi A. Al Shibihi, *Travel Genre in Arabic Literature: A Selective Literary and Historical Study*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, the University Professors, 1998, p.1

[5] Present at this round-table at Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Kénitra, Morocco, the following professors:

- Dr. Ibrahim Souлами, “Critical Analysis of the book *A Moroccan in New York*”.

- Ms Khadija El Merouazi, “Genre and Narrative Elements.”

- Ms Fatima Kaddou, “The American School in Comparative Literature between the Cultural and Moral Principles.”==

In his presentation, Dr. Ibrahim Soulami, a professor of Arabic literature, pointed out that he shared with the writer El Alamy the experience of writing about the United States and about New York in particular. When he first visited New York in the late sixties, Professor Soulami was then an active member in the political struggle for independence. This militant spirit shaped his world-view and urged him to be engaged in important political issues to advocate the cause of the colonized countries and their legitimate rights for freedom and independence.

In his book *Ta Amoulate fi Al Adab Al Mouassir* (in English *Reflections on Modern Literature*), Dr. Soulami portrays his trip to U.S.A. He believed that the journey from his native town, Kenitra, to Manhattan, New York, was a journey from one world to a completely different one as if they were two different tales whose events took place in two distinct and remote worlds both in time and space. He also asserted that he did not like New York very much because its buildings and sky-scrapers were modern and new, and lacked the historical depth that he had found in Fez, Cairo or Paris<sup>[6]</sup>.

During his visit to the United States, Dr. Soulami witnessed important historical moments in the American life. He referred to the Vietnam War and its social, economic and psychological impacts on the American people. Moreover, he discussed the struggle of the African-Americans to achieve racial dignity, economic and political self-sufficiency. He also depicted the hippie phenomenon as a group of social outcasts (though some of them were very rich). They wore long hair, were clad in unusual styles of dress and showed little or no respect to social conventions as a reaction against the political and economic institutions.

Dr. Soulami also discussed linguistic matters. He noted that the Americans believed that to learn foreign languages was a waste of time because English is a universal language. He met a charming lady, a reporter in *The Times*, who told him this story:

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== - Mr. Samir El Azhar, "A critical Reading of A Moroccan in New York".

All these presentations were in Arabic and were published in the Moroccan newspaper *El Aalam* (the Cultural Issue), Saturday 01st May 1999.

[6] Ibrahim Soulami, *Reflections on Modern Literature* (in Arabic *Ta Amoulate fi Al Adab Al Mouassir*), (Casablanca, Morocco: Dar Athakafa, 1979), p.38.

After the Second World War, an American officer came home. He was able to speak three languages beside his mother tongue. His friends blamed him for learning languages which he would not use. To convince them of the importance of foreign languages, the officer said: "I use English in financial and commercial transactions. I use German to give orders in the army. Because French is a refined language, I use it to court ladies and in polite circumstances. Finally, Spanish, because it is a quick language, I use it to curse and insult people."<sup>[7]</sup>

Professor Soulami admitted that Mr. El Alamy belonged to the post-colonial generation. Nevertheless, Professor Soulami pointed out that Mr. El Alamy did not tackle fundamental social and political issues but was rather impressed by the glittering and exciting life of New York:

I attacked the first burger, eyes fixed on the street, on the city where everything is more imposing, more impressive, higher, grander, and of course bigger, much bigger, infinitely bigger. Starting with the subway, with its 715 miles of track, 469 stations, 5950 cars – far and away the biggest urban transport network in the country. I thought on the sheer extravagance of this place, the most-filmed city on earth – 110 films and 314 TV movies in a single year. New York claims the country's biggest museum, the Metropolitan. And Wall Street, the biggest financial district – Macy's "the world's largest department store" – The Strand Bookstore, with more than eight miles of shelves, the biggest used book store in the United States<sup>[8]</sup>.

I started my presentation by describing the cover of the book *A Moroccan in New York*. It shows a white surface in the middle of which there are a wall, a door and a palm-tree, typically Moroccan tokens. At the bottom, there is a fragment of an American dollar from which the two eyes of George Washington

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[7] My translation from Arabic, *Reflections on Modern Literature*, p.49.

[8] Youssouf Amine El Alamy, *Un Marocain à New York*, (Casablanca, Morocco: Edition Eddif, 1998). The book was translated from French by John Liechty and published at Lexington Books (USA). p. 20.

appear, a traditional symbol of the American Dream. It seems advisable to refer to the importance of the door in the Arab Muslim architecture. In Morocco, Imperial cities, like Marrakech, Fez, Meknes etc..., are surrounded by big walls that protected these cities from alien attacks or from the invasions of the adjacent tribes. In this massive architectural structure, the door occupied a strategic position as the only exit/entrance to the town.

The juxtaposition of the wall, with its door, and the American dollar is highly symbolic of the influence of these two cultures on the writer's imaginary. Mr. El Alamy depicts New York as if it were Marrakech, the Imperial city, with its Koutoubia Mosque and its surrounding walls of amazing thickness:

Nous York Sidi, with its 1001 minarets is a city like no other. The Grand Mosque of the World Trade Center, its twin spires rising more than 400 meters, calls the faithful to prayer in ever-increasing numbers. Like a giant index finger raised to the sky, the Empire State Building evokes the oneness of Allah.

The Friday prayer over, open carriages line the long walls of the city or clip-clop towards the date palm groves of Central Park. There, under a symphony of birdsong and fountain the families on board will savor *bastila* (a light crusty pastry stuffed with chicken and almonds), the inevitable seven-vegetable *cous-cous*, and a lamb and prune *tajine* left to simmer all day over a clay brazier<sup>[9]</sup>.

Since Mr. El Alamy conceived New York as a city surrounded by "walls of infinite length", like any traditional Moroccan town, I suggested therefore entering his "Nous York Sidi" through its main doors:

**a) The media door:**

To explore this American world and New York, symbol of economic and financial growth, Mr. El Alamy relied on several occasions on the media. Aware of the fact that the media reflect the moral values and social institutions of their country, he examined the newspaper (a Parliament Act prohibited mothers to

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[9] A Marocain in New York, p.37.

nurse their babies in public places), television series (amoral relationships), a television program (broken family ties and attempts to reconcile family members), and cinema (an original version of a Japanese movie). He watched the TV news to discover scenes and images either of human tragedies or natural catastrophes:

... a white teenager of 16 raped by a gang of black hoods and left for dead. CBS had won the exclusive rights to broadcast amateur footage videotaped at the scene of the crime...Before a crowd of 4,000 people a pretty eighteen-year old woman by the name of Roop Kanwar had thrown herself onto the funeral pyre of her husband. This was done in accordance with Hindu tradition said the commentator on the scene, so that Roop need not outlive the man she loved...After the flambe we were served a few in-house specialties: a mortality on the interstate, a letter bomb, the wreck of a cruise ship, a mass suicide. There was a range of exotic desserts to finish off: a bloody civil war on the other side of the world, an entire community wiped out by an earthquake, children ravaged by famine, all garnished with a cadaver here, a monstrous crime there<sup>[10]</sup>.

#### **b) The door of poverty/wealth:**

New York is considered the place of wealth. It is a symbol of the American dream, a world of unbounded opportunities. Mr. El Alamy believed that to survive in this world, one has to be intelligent, competitive and constantly innovative. Even the beggars have to be clever to attract the attention of the passers-by. Begging alms in New York requires imagination, audacity and talent:

In New York, it is not powerlessness or misery that stirs sympathy, but audacity and imagination. In a society devoted to entertainment, where the instantaneous is all that matters, where the stage has replaced life, the poor person had better play along. He knows it is not enough to

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[10] Ibid. p. 19

merely solicit passers-by. Advertising has hit street level to stay, and stolen our attention. It has overrun every fence, bus stop, subway station – all places the poor once had to themselves.<sup>[11]</sup>

### c) The door of food:

Eager to discover more truths about the American world, Mr. El Alamy devoted a whole chapter to discussing the revolution of the hamburger. In an ironic style, he enumerates the advantages of the hamburger as it has freed Man from the institutional space of food (restaurant, dining room, and kitchen) and from its social obligations (family members had to meet at certain time to have lunch and dinner):

Given the universal appeal of the hamburger today, it is clear that liberal pluralist and consumerist values have outlived the last gasp of economic determinism. Dire proclamations concerning the fall of America seem premature to say the least, unless the country should for some mysterious reason run out of ketchup. For now, market forces rule -- the very same forces that transformed Rabat's Soviet Cultural Center into a McDonald's<sup>[12]</sup>.

Similarly, another chapter is devoted to the chewing-gum. Mr. El Alamy asserts that the chewing-gum is a national symbol for the Americans in the same way that are the chips for the Belgians, tea for the British, wine for the French and the couscous for the Moroccans. Again, in an ironic tone, he refers to the genius of Mr. Wrigley, the man who contributed to make the chewing-gum widely spread:

According to Wrigley his product aids digestion. Back in 1915 he was the first to position chewing-gum next to the cash register in restaurants, the first to send gum to children on their second birthday -- not (God forbid) from any wish to secure their dependency but merely to wish them well. In addition, chewing-gum helps one concentrate, work harder, produce more. Wrigley is clear on this -- gum

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[11] Ibid. p. 6.

[12] Ibid. p 13.

is the best friend a working man ever had, especially in times of crisis or need. Marx had it all wrong -- better for him to have invested his thought (and money) in chewing-gum<sup>[13]</sup>.

I concluded my presentation by drawing an analogy between Mr. El Alamy's first adventure to explore the world of New York and his attempt to write his first novel. *A Moroccan in New York* is a book which combines both a personal experience (a diary) and a literary tradition (a novel). The narrative technique reflects the complex human and architectural structure of this metropolis. At the end of this experience/book, Mr. El Alamy acknowledges that New York is too big, mysterious and enigmatic to be understood:

To this day, it has served to remind me that while I may have grasped the parts, I have missed the whole. I may humor myself that I know this town and have penetrated its secrets, but New York will forever slip through my fingers.<sup>[14]</sup>

Ten years later, I received a generous invitation to attend the opening ceremony of the Ben M'sik Community Museum's first exhibition: *Ben M'sik: Creating Community in Casablanca*. This project was the fruit of a joint partnership between Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Ben M'sik, Casablanca, Morocco, and Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA.<sup>[15]</sup>

When I arrived at New York John F. Kennedy International Airport, I inquired about Terminal 3 to board another plane to Atlanta, Georgia. On my way to that terminal, which was in another part of the airport, I saw a number of big luxurious cars as if they were on show. I remembered F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a microcosm of the experience of this nation. The novel depicts the hopes and plights of the American Dream, a belief in the possibility of achieving some glowing future. Jay Gatsby is able, thanks to his hard work and

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[13] *Ibid.* p.p. 55-56.

[14] *Ibid.* p. 85.

[15] My utmost thanks and appreciations are for Dean Majid Kaddouri, Dean Richard Vengroff, Associate Dean Thierry Léger, Mrs. Cindy Vengroff, Dr. Nina Morgan, Ms. Deborah Smith, Dr. Jennifer W. Dickey and Dr. Catherine Lewis for their constant support and valuable help to make my visit to the United States a success.



purity of devotion, to achieve this dream. His mansion, clothes and car represent this material success:

Gatsby's gorgeous car lurched up the rocky drive to my door and gave out a burst of melody from its three-noted horn...It was a rich cream colour, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes, and terraced with labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.<sup>[16]</sup>

My mind full with the world of J. Gatsby, I saw two policemen leaning on their police-car. They were dressed in dark uniforms, equipped with sophisticated radios and an arsenal of weapons. They reminded me of "The Shield", the American police TV series. Greeting them, I pointed to one of those limousine cars and said: "This is the United States of America". They smiled and replied: "Welcome to the United States".

The following day, according to my schedule, I had to give at nine o'clock a presentation, Ben M'sik: Creating Community in Casablanca, to a public history class. I started my presentation by showing a map of the world to designate the geographical location of Morocco. Relying on my previous trips abroad (mainly to Europe), people have little knowledge of geography. I remember that I was once in London (I was twenty years old then) and wanted to buy some stamps. I asked the lady at the post office to give me some stamps to Morocco. She echoed Monaco. I repeated politely the word "Morocco". The lady asked me how I spelled Morocco. She opened a book, with countries arranged in alphabetical order and the prices of stamps. I felt offended because the lady was unable to find out where my country was. I silently blamed her ignorance and walked away.

Nowadays, experience has taught me that people are not to be blamed if they do not know where my country is. It is the fault of the Ministry of Tourism which has launched an ambitious program to attract ten million tourists by 2010. When I encounter some people who still do not know where Morocco is, this means that the Ministry of Tourism has failed in its information mission that is to advertise the historical, social and cultural image of Morocco abroad.

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[16] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1950), p. 70.

I then referred to the recently Oscar awarded movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. I drew a parallel between the social and economic realities of these two environments. Both represent social misery and deprivation. Ben M'sik has been a marginal neighborhood for many years yet it has also been in transition, accommodating thousands of migrants as they flock to the city. Thus, the district of Ben M'sik has been undergoing important changes since 1980 as the political authorities have designed a plan to find adequate solutions to the various problems facing the inhabitants of this neighborhood. These efforts have been made to provide the people of Ben M'sik with decent housing and to build social, educational and cultural institutions not only to improve the social conditions of the resident population but also to increase their sense of belonging in this part of Casablanca.

The fascinating thing about this experience is that the American students listened with interest and attention to facts and figures about a society that is thousands of kilometers away across the Atlantic. At the end of the presentation, they asked interesting questions about the Ben Msik community and about the Moroccan culture and traditions in general. This experience to talk to American students made me believe firmly that such a joint cultural program, based on exchanging information about communities, which are believed to be different, will certainly bridge the cultural gap and foster cross-cultural understanding.

The world discovered Atlanta in 1996 when the Olympic Games were held there. The Olympic Stadium, the Centennial Olympic Park and the Georgia Dome stand in the middle of the city to remind the visitor that Atlanta was, during the Olympics, the world's capital as millions of spectators from all over the world followed the games.

Another place of more importance, to me at least, is the monument of Martin Luther King Jr. It is erected in Atlanta, the home of the late civil rights leader, to pay tribute to this man who had devoted his time, energy and life to fighting racial discrimination in peaceful ways.

In addition to this monument, a museum was built to commemorate the greatness and nobility of Martin Luther King Jr. It was established after his death as a living memorial to his philosophy of nonviolent conflict resolution and social change.

On Saturday morning, I visited this museum. Outside the building, in front of the main entrance, a statue of Mahatma Gandhi stands. It is homage to the man who had influenced M. L. King's policy of civil disobedience. Gandhi, in

his struggle for India's independence against the British, advocated non-violent direct action which he called "Satyagrata", meaning "clinging to the truth".

When I stepped inside the building, a solemn atmosphere prevailed. African-Americans came from different regions of the United States, as if on a pilgrimage to visit the temple of a holy man. While I was listening to King's famous speech "I have a Dream", I had, to tell you the truth, goose-flesh all over my body. I thought that this man must have been inspired by God and chosen by him to lead the African-American community towards salvation as well as social and economic equality.

I went through the photo gallery, the audio gallery, the video gallery, the artifacts gallery and came into the room where the wagon, which had been hired for his funeral, was displayed. In that room, photos of people mourning the assassinated priest were hung on the wall, others of the big funeral, and most moving were the letters written by the school-mates of the children of King. In a child-like handwriting and innocent style, devoid of any stylistic decorum, these children expressed their sympathy and sadness to their friends for the loss of their father.

Another moment of intense feelings was when people stood in front of an artificial red flower. The written commentary stated that King used to give his wife a flower every day. On the day of his assassination, he offered her that artificial flower. The lady was unhappy because the flower was not real but King told her that that flower would never wither and would always remind her of his love for her.

Another unforgettable moment in my trip to Atlanta is my visit to the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta. When I arrived at the spot, I found hundreds of people queuing for their tickets. In fact, the most convenient way to buy tickets is on line, but those who are unable, for some reason, to purchase them online have to wait for hours and hours in long and endless lines. For those who are fond of statistics, I include these figures:

- In the first two years, more than 6.3 million guests (one for every gallon of water in the Ocean Voyager Exhibit) have visited the Aquarium, making it the most visited aquarium in the world.

- One million guests visited within the first 100 days, and 3.6 million guests visited in the first year.

· Guests from 6 continents, all 50 states and 143 countries have visited the Aquarium.

· There have been Annual Pass holders from 49 states.<sup>[17]</sup>

More important, The Georgia Aquarium is the world's largest with more than eight million gallons of water and the largest collection of aquatic animals. The mission of the Georgia Aquarium is "to be an entertaining, educational and scientific institution featuring exhibits and programs of the highest standards; offering engaging and exciting guest experiences promoting the conservation of aquatic biodiversity throughout the world."<sup>[18]</sup> Bernie and Bill Marcus, benefactors of Georgia Aquarium, in a welcome note stated:

"The Georgia Aquarium is our gift to the residents of this state, and our way of helping everyone enjoy and understand more about the wonderful diversity of creatures that live in the sea and rivers of the world. We want you to have fun during your visit, and we hope you will take away a greater understanding and appreciation of aquatic animals both great and small. From the bottom of our hearts, we welcome you to the Georgia Aquarium."<sup>[19]</sup>

It was indeed a wonderful and exciting experience. While I was exploring the different galleries, my memory went back to my childhood. When I was in the primary school, my family used to take us, my cousins and me, on a trip to Casablanca once a year to visit the International Fair of Casablanca and the Casablanca Aquarium. Certainly, we cannot compare the two aquariums. Nevertheless, regardless of size, means and number of species of sea animals, I believe that the Casablanca Aquarium marked my childlike memory. It was a terrible mistake to have demolished that aquarium, the only one in the whole country where Moroccans, adults and children alike, explored the sea world.

The Mayor of Fez, a town, which is about two hours drive from the sea, has been nourishing the dream, to use his own terms, "to bring the sea to the people of Fez". In other words, he promised the inhabitants of Fez to build the biggest swimming-pool in the Arab and Muslim world. Honestly, I do not see any edu-

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[17] The Georgia Aquarium, [www.georgiaaquarium.org](http://www.georgiaaquarium.org).

[18] [www.georgiaaquarium.org](http://www.georgiaaquarium.org).

[19] A brochure of The Georgia Aquarium.

cational, social or economic impact of this 'project' on the town. An aquarium, though small, will be an economic magnet that can attract investments.

Recently, I have read funny news on a Moroccan newspaper<sup>[20]</sup>. The Mayor and the town-council of Agadir, a town in the south of Morocco, agreed to spend millions of dollars on building four public fountains. They claimed that this 'project' will attract more tourists to Agadir. Needless to mention that marginal districts in Agadir lack appropriate health and educational infrastructure, and needless to argue that a town needs entertaining cultural institutions, such as museums or even an aquarium, to attract national as well as foreign tourists. I include the following facts about the economic impact of the Georgia Aquarium on Atlanta for our Mayors to consider:

- A Georgia State study estimated that the Aquarium will have an impact of between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion on the state of Georgia in its first five years of operation.

- Tom Bell of Cousins properties estimates \$3 billion in construction development in the immediate vicinity of the Aquarium since 2005.

- Hilton Garden Inn and Twelve Hotel have opened near the Aquarium with the W Hotel and Hard Rock Hotel scheduled to open in the future.

- Eight restaurants have opened around the Aquarium.

- The new World of Coca-Cola opened next to the Aquarium in May 2007.

- A Civil Rights Museum is scheduled to open in Pemberton Place next to the Aquarium and the new World of Coca-Cola.

- Imagine It! The Children's Museum of Atlanta reported a 160 percent jump in membership when the Aquarium opened.

- After the Aquarium opened, City Pass added Atlanta as the 10th city to offer the pass.

- Spending is up 10 percent for visitors to Atlanta (fact courtesy of the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau).

- The number of nights guests choose to stay in Atlanta hotels has increased since the Aquarium opened (ACVB).<sup>[21]</sup>

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[20] The Moroccan newspaper, Al Massae, Wednesday 12 August 2009, number 900, page 20.

[21] [www.georgiaaquarium.org](http://www.georgiaaquarium.org).

Just a few meters from the Georgia Aquarium, the World of Coca Cola stands. It is located on the southern edge of Pemberton Place, which is named after John S. Pemberton, the creator of the original Coca-Cola formula. On visiting this “museum”, I discovered how a recipe from Atlanta conquered the whole world and became a global brand. The building of the World of Coca-Cola, with its spacious eleven galleries, reflects the power of this commercial empire. To my mind, Coca Cola is more than just a drink; it is an economic dynasty that is ruling the world. A French colleague told me that when he was a teenager, he went to Morocco to do mountaineering. He and his friends climbed the Toubkal, the highest Atlas Mountain in Morocco (4165 meters high). When they arrived at the top, they found a small shop. As they were hungry, they wanted to buy some food. To their great surprise, the shop sold only Coca Cola. I am almost sure that if life were on the moon, Man would be able to purchase Coca Cola there. In the World of Coca Cola, I found out that in 1985, astronauts tested the “Coca Cola Space Can” onboard the space Shuttle Challenger. Isn't it amazing?

At Kennesaw State University, I had the opportunity to talk to American students on two other occasions. The second one was when I gave a lecture about Elizabethan sonnets. It was a wonderful experience since I dealt with the theme of immortality in some sonnets that celebrated love, this magic force that the world needs today. The students were very pleased to comment on the notions of love and immortality. The third occasion was when I was invited to give a presentation about “Moroccan Obama-mania” to KSU faculty members and students. After reminding the audience of the long diplomatic relationship between the two countries as Morocco was the first country to recognize the Independence of U.S.A., I talked about the ways the Moroccan press, students and people reacted to the election of President Barack Obama. I cite here only one example to illustrate the Moroccans' attitudes to the election of President Obama. Ahmam Lahsan stated:

I personally would like to congratulate Mr. Obama for being elected President of the USA, the country we all love. I have been to the USA twice and I always feel that it is the country of everyone. I like everything in it, especially the people. I have also served Peace Corps for many years. Yes, Morocco and the USA have been friends and allies for years and they will stay so for years to come. We all welcome Obama, Mr. President, to come here and address the

world. Peace, tolerance and prosperity are our goals. May God bless our two countries. Amen.<sup>[22]</sup>

The original thing about this presentation, at least for me, is that it was scheduled to take place from 12:00 to 2:00 p.m. To allow faculty members and administration staff to attend the presentation, it was scheduled at lunch time. Thus, while everybody was tasting his meal, I was enjoying my talk about Moroccan American relations. It was a good experience that taught me that, with a good management of time, everything is possible in the United States.

I have always wished to attend an African-American Church service. I asked my KSU colleagues to take me to an African-American Church. On Sunday morning, we went to Ebenezer Baptist Church, Martin Luther King's Church. There were hundreds of African-Americans and a few whites, mainly European tourists who, like me, would like to undergo this unique experience while in America. The striking thing was the way these African-Americans were dressed. They were elegantly clad as if they were invited to a wedding ceremony. Men wore their nice, expensive suits and sparkling polished shoes. Ladies wore their best 'tailleurs' and beautiful hats.

At the entrance, we were given a newsletter, *The Horizon*, an official publication of that Church. On the front page, there was an article, *Raising Up Timothy*, celebrating Ebenezer Baptist's 123rd Anniversary. While waiting for the service to begin, I skimmed through the article to find an interesting reference to President Obama:

Jesus is the ultimate role and the Lord blesses us with His "Timothys." President Obama is one. Although President Obama's recent pitch for unity took a billion dollar beating, he is proving to be at once Timothy and role model, following Abraham Lincoln's example of courtesy and generosity to his opponents, and imitating the 16th president's high regard for government "of the people, by the people and for the people."<sup>[23]</sup>

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[22] Petition to have Barack Obama speak in Morocco: <http://www.moroccoboard.com/news/345-petition-to-have-obama-speak-in-morocco>.

[23] "Raising Up Timothy" by Lydia Walker in *The Horizon*, Volume 6, Issue 3, March 2009, page 1.

The service began by marvelous gospel songs that stirred the audience's emotions and religious excitement. In a spiritual moment, the Rev. Raphael G. Warnock, a young man of about forty, stood before the people and started his sermon. In his impromptu spoken religious address, there was solemnity and humor. He repeated the statement several times but in a different voice pitches and tones. Sometimes, he told jokes to illustrate a point to make people laugh and relieve them of the pressure of the moment, like a comic relief in a Shakespearian tragedy. Every Five minutes or so, an African-American woman, as if on trance, stood, stretched her hand open upward and shouted "hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah". I marveled at the eloquence, power and charm of this young minister. I thought that God endows some men with charismatic character and genuine talent to convince and lead people. Martin Luther king Jr., President Obama and the Rev. Raphael G. Warnock are among these chosen men.

To celebrate Ebenezer Baptist's 123rd anniversary, a gospel group, made of white and African-American students, chanted hymns that roused people's excitement higher. This gospel group had visited South Africa and sung in the presence of Nelson Mandela, the legendary anti-apartheid activist and Noble Peace Prize winner. They had also been invited to sing in the White House on several occasions. My KSU colleagues and I were delighted to undergo this spiritual experience that has taught me a lesson. We all believe in the same God but each one of us has his own way(s) and ritual(s) to worship God and invoke His mercy and grace.

I have the privilege to be the coordinator of The Ben M'sik Community Museum which is the first community-based museum in my country, Morocco. Its mission is "to preserve memory by interpreting, exhibiting and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of the neighborhood and its region". Therefore, I was in Atlanta to attend the opening ceremony of the Ben M'sik Community Museum's first travelling exhibition (Ben M'sik: Creating Community in Casablanca). This project is an excellent example of constructive partnership between two universities across the Atlantic. The exhibit was a result of joint efforts of Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Ben M'sik, Casablanca, Morocco, and Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA.

The exhibition Ben M'sik: Creating Community in Casablanca is comprised of ten cloth panels, each of which tells a part of the rich story of this diverse and unique neighborhood in Morocco. This exhibition provides a general overview of the neighborhood through its cultural productions and serves as a guide for



future exhibitions. Although it focuses on one community in Casablanca, it reflects the multicultural heritage of the city and the nation. It is written in English and Arabic to reach the widest possible audience.

The opening ceremony of the exhibition *Ben M'sik: Creating Community* in Casablanca was well attended. There were distinguished guests, KSU faculty members, administration staff and students. In an amiable atmosphere, people first listened to the inaugural speeches and then contemplated, with interest and admiration, the ten panels that tell about the everyday life of the inhabitants of the Ben M'sik neighborhood and the rich culture of my country, Morocco. I am convinced that in this world where intolerance and narrow-mindedness prevail, this kind of projects builds constructive dialogue to overcome cultural barriers.

My visit to Atlanta drew to an end and I had to fly northward to Providence, Rhode Island. Like Ibn Battuta, in quest of knowledge and new experiences, I had to explore new horizons. I had to attend the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Public History that was to be held at Providence. At Atlanta Airport, there were dozens of machines where people could either buy their plane-tickets or check in theirs. I preferred to look for a check-in-counter where I could speak to a human being, in flesh and bone, rather than dealing with a lifeless machine. Accordingly, I was surprised to find the airport crowded. Naively, I thought that there was a national vacation, which allowed people to travel massively. I found out later that the American people prefer to travel by air. It is comfortable and saves time. It is much easier to take a plane in the United States than a bus in Morocco where you have to wait for a bus that may come in five minutes or in five hours.

At the National Council on Public History, I attended an interesting presentation. A professor of public history spoke about the district where he had grown up. It was a marginalized slum neighborhood in Marietta, Georgia. In the sixties, there was still racial segregation. Therefore, there were separate districts, hospitals, schools etc...for the white Americans and the African-Americans. What was original about his experience was the fact that the poor whites and the poor African-Americans lived side by side in the same block. Yet, there was a line of barracks for the white community and on parallel line another one for the African-Americans. As he discussed the social and racial problems that burst from time to time, he showed some old photographs of this slum neighborhood. There were striking similarities between this district and the Ben M'sik slums. I discovered that poverty can not only bring two communities together at times of hostility but also two neighborhoods across the Atlantic.

Part of the rich program of that Annual Meeting of the National Council on Public History, were a field trip through the streets of Providence and a visit to John Brown House Museum. Providence is the capital of Rhode Island, America's smallest state. Providence was founded in 1936 by Roger Williams, a persecuted religious dissenter from Massachusetts Bay Colony. He named the area in honor of "God's merciful Providence" which, according to him, guided him and his followers to settle in this haven. Providence was one of the original thirteen Colonies in the newly discovered continent, America.

A young and charming woman was our guide in this cultural field trip through the streets of Providence. She provided detailed historical backgrounds about the historical sites and answered people's questions. On hearing Salem Village, which was, as a matter of fact, just a few miles from Providence, I remembered Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Scarlet Letter* that depict this world of early Puritan settlers. Providence is one of the oldest cities in the United States. The architecture of the buildings reminded me of London. In fact, Providence, with its houses, public buildings, bridges and river, which divides the town into two parts, seemed to me like a miniature of London.

The visit to John Brown House Museum was another enriching experience. John Brown built his fortune in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Our charming guide told us that while John Brown was a slave trader, his brother Moses was an ardent Abolitionist. She also informed us about the ethical controversy that followed the decision of making his house a museum. The John Brown House Museum's leaflet provides the following facts:

In 1788 John Brown, a wealthy businessman, patriot, privateer, politician, slave trader, and China Trade pioneer, built the house at 52 Power Street as a showcase for his wealth and power. This stately residence was also the domestic setting for John Brown's family saga. Here, John, his wife Sarah and their four children, as well as their descendants, experienced the births, illnesses, deaths, personal triumphs and tragedies of life in pre-Civil War America.<sup>[24]</sup>

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[24] The leaflet of The John Brown House Museum.

We visited the different rooms of this big mansion including one where slave chains and manacles were displayed. There were also some books, used during the trans-Atlantic voyage, as records of the African slaves (their number, gender, children, people who had died during the journey). Our guide mentioned that John Brown was also a China trader. His ship, *The General Washington*, was the first vessel to sail from Rhode Island to trade with China. When we were in front of an old map, our guide pointed to North Africa and said that one of his ships had been attacked by pirates in this part of the world. I reckoned that it was during the Barbary Wars. Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli were involved in piracy activities. Morocco was also known for supporting piracy. However, since it had signed a treaty with U.S.A. in 1777, it never harassed American vessels. Since that time, Morocco has enjoyed good and strong diplomatic relations with the United States. In December 1780, the American government sent a message to Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdellah, the Sultan of Morocco, to thank him for his decision to endow the American ships with his protection:

We the Congress of the 13 United States of North America, have been informed of your Majesty's favourable regard to the interests of the people we represent [...] We assure you of our earnest desire to cultivate a sincere and firm peace and friendship with your Majesty and to make it lasting to all posterity. Should any of the subjects of our states come within the ports of your Majesty's territories, we flatter ourselves they will receive the benefit of your protection and benevolence. You may assure yourself of every protection and assistance to your subjects from the people of these states whenever and wherever they may have it in their power. We pray your Majesty may enjoy long life and uninterrupted prosperity.<sup>[25]</sup>

Of the different activities and presentations at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Public History, I chose a film screening: *Scarred Justice: Orangeburg Massacre 1968*. It was a poignant film that tried to shed light on one of the bloodiest tragedies of the Civil Rights era. In 1968, the police force invaded the South Carolina State College in Orangeburg and shot the African-Ameri-

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[25] My presentation about "Moroccan Obama-mania" to KSU faculty members and students, Kenesaw State University, April 2009.

can students. Several students were badly wounded and three were murdered. What was extraordinary about this film screening experience was the fact that an African-American woman, who had produced this scrupulously researched documentary, was present in this film screen session. After the projection, she answered people's questions. Sometimes tears in her eyes, she recalled specific moments while she was making that documentary. I thought I was privileged to have attended this session where this profoundly moving film was shown. I select a passage from the hand-out that was distributed on the occasion:

The Orangeburg Massacre has been excluded from most histories of the Civil Rights Movement. But forty years later, some remember the tragedy as if it happened only yesterday. The film interviews the most important participants on both sides of the tragedy, some of whom speak for the first time about the Massacre. The survivors are still visibly traumatized by that night...Cleveland Sellers, now president of Voorhees, a historically black college in South Carolina, and his son, Bakari, at 21 the youngest state legislator in South Carolina history, call on us to remember those slain in Orangeburg with the other Civil Rights martyrs. With a resonance that carries us far beyond the tragedy itself, the film is a powerful antidote to historical amnesia.<sup>[26]</sup>

After describing specific cultural events I attended during my trip to USA, I would like to discuss some general social points. Either in Atlanta or in Providence, I kept telling my KSU colleagues that "everything is big in America". Wherever we went, this statement was true. The Americans drive big, monster cars on big, spacious roads and on big high-ways of four or five lanes. They live in big, large houses. They build big skyscrapers and big, gigantic recreational facilities. When you go to a restaurant, meal is served in big, fair-sized plates that can feed four to five persons. Soft drink is served in big, massive glasses, which can hold one liter of soda that can be filled several times for free.

The media are double-edge tools. On the one hand, they keep you informed about the latest news and can even take you to the spot to witness a specific

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[26] Hand-out, Scarred Justice: the Orangeburg Massacre 1968, page 2.

event taking place (a hurricane, a tsunami, a devastating war, space conquest etc...). On the other hand, they sometimes bias people's views and manipulate their minds. However, travel widens people's horizons and makes them undergo first hand experiences that shape their minds and characters. St. Augustine was quite right when he said: "The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page."

I was fortunate to visit the U.S. on another occasion to attend the 2010 MCCA Colloquium co-hosted by AAM and the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs at the Department of State<sup>[27]</sup>. It was with extreme pleasure and gratitude that I welcomed the offer secure in the belief that it would be a good occasion, on the one hand, to share our modest experience with the different delegations present at this prestigious event, and on the other hand, to learn from their enriching experiences.

Furthermore, I flattered to lead a delegation that was made of a professor from the Department of History and four students from the Department of English and American Studies and the Department of History<sup>[28]</sup> to take part in the different activities of our joint program "Creating Community: the Casablanca-Kennesaw Project" that has offered professors and students from both universities and community members of two distant countries an opportunity to meet and discuss their respective experiences in the process of engaging in community collaboration and interpreting social history and culture in a cross-cultural context.

At a time when the world seems fractured by religious and cultural differences, projects such as "Creating Community: The Casablanca-Kennesaw Project" offer students a chance to immerse themselves in each other's culture and

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[27] I would like to reiterate my gratitude to The American Association of Museums and to the State Department of Educational and Cultural Affairs. To Heather Berry, Markita Brooks and Kelly McCorkendale and to all the individuals who planned and coordinated this visit and to their respective institutions which provided funds I say thank you.

[28] Abdelouhab Dbich, Professor at the Department of History.

Youssef Fdilal, a master student at the Department of English and American Studies.

Wafaa Afkir, an undergraduate student at the Department of English and American Studies.

Dalal El Gherbaoui, an undergraduate student at the Department of English and American Studies.

Khadija Essabar, a master student at the Department of History.

community. It is an exciting and enlightening experience for both the Moroccans and the Americans because they have been engaged in an honest dialogue to explore each other's culture.

To be honest, this project has opened our eyes to the fact that museums should not be static places where antiquities and works of arts are displayed but can be dynamic institutions concerned with the present as well as the future of their communities. In addition to this, this project has taught us that museums can promote cultural diversity and consolidate people-to-people diplomacy.

Bearing all these objectives in mind and thanks to the grant we received from the American Association of Museums, we have embarked on a series of activities that have brought Moroccan and American students and community members together:

1) At Faculty of Letters, Ben M'sik, Casablanca, we have formed a team of twelve undergraduate and graduate students belonging to two different departments: the department of English and American Studies and the Department of History.

2) Our team has participated with KSU team in workshops via Skype and video conferences on conducting oral histories in a community museum setting.

3) Our team conducted a survey about Moroccan perceptions of the U.S. More than 300 questionnaires were distributed to first year students of the Department of Arabic Literature, the Department of Islamic Studies, the Department of Philosophy and the Department of American Studies. The aim of this survey is to see the perceptions of Moroccan students of the U.S.

4) The Ben M'sik Community Museum has received some books on oral history and community-museum engagement, in addition to four digital cameras.

5) We have recorded thirty interviews of the residents of the Ben M'sik neighborhood. They have spoken about their lives in this district that was once marginalized economically and educationally. They have shared with us their private stories that are sometimes sad and melancholic.

6) A delegation from KSU led by Dr. Sandra Bird and four students: Emily Arp, Jay Lutz, Stefanie Green and Meagan Diedolf made a trip of one week to Morocco in December 2009. This visit enabled the American students and the faculty member to meet their Moroccan counterparts and to get acquainted with the Islamic culture.

The KSU delegation attended the opening ceremony of the exhibit “Ben M’sik: Creating Community in Casablanca.” After being shown at KSU and other universities in Georgia, the U.S., the exhibit returned to Morocco to be displayed in the Faculty of Letters, Ben M’sik and to tour other Moroccan universities. This opening ceremony was an opportunity for the KSU delegation to meet the Ben M’sik students and to have an idea about the Moroccan culture from the different artifacts which were displayed on this occasion.

To my mind, these exchange programs can sometimes be more important than books in that they allow students to undergo first hand experiences. When they shake someone’s hands, they feel its warmth. When they talk to someone, they see his smiling face. When they share something with somebody, their hearts are filled with joy and peace. After this cultural experience, Emily Arp, one of the KSU students who visited Morocco, wrote:

Thinking back, this trip exceeded any notion I could have possibly had about the people and culture in Morocco. It is one thing to come back with great photographs and post-cards, but I returned with lasting friendships and an understanding of a culture very different than my own. The sites and smells were amazing but what will linger most in my mind are the individuals who deeply touched my life. More than anything, this experience has planted a seed inside my heart to encourage others not only to travel, but also to engage in open conversation about the relationship America has with Islamic nations and the desire to strengthen a lasting friendship. Perhaps if both parties attempted to see the many similarities, a more open attitude can be used to address the differences.

Four months later, the Moroccan delegation, as I have already stated, went to the United States to attend the “Coffee and Conversation” ceremony organized at the KSU museum and to participate in the 2010 MCCA Colloquium. The KSU team had been engaged in interviewing Muslims in Georgia about issues related to the theme of Muslim life in the South. Their activities culminated in a ceremony “Coffee and Conversation” where some American and non-American citizens were invited to give their perceptions of what is to be a Muslim. A big

audience attended this event and listened to eight panelists who presented their testimonies about Islam, relying on their personal experiences<sup>[29]</sup>.

The Moroccan delegation flew to Washington D.C. to participate in the first MCCA colloquium. It was an opportunity for the Moroccan team to meet other delegations coming from different parts of the world driven with this hope of building bridges of love, hope and understanding on this planet<sup>[30]</sup>. Several constructive meetings were held between the members of the different delegations to draw lessons from this first experience and to explore various ways to enhance this project that has overcome cultural differences, geographical boundaries and time differences.

In Atlanta and Washington, the American and the Moroccan delegations merged into one homogeneous team. Together, they engaged in the same cultural and recreational activities. Together, they visited places, shared experiences and had fun. At the cultural level, both teams exchanged their cultural heritage. Each one has become aware of the other's culture. At the professional level, both

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[29] -Naureen Farouk, "Being Muslim in the American South."

-Rumeysa Goker, "The status of women and the family in Islam."

-Mirkena Maryam Ozer, "The status of women and the family in Islam."

-Khadija Sabbar, "Islam and the new family code in Morocco."

-Ayhan Kurucu, "American perceptions of Islam."

-Ali Abedi, "The role of Muslim Student Association at Kennesaw."

-Stephanie Green (MCCA student participant, Kennesaw), "Learning about Islam through the oral history interviews and travel to Morocco."

-Samir El Azhar, "Islam is a religion of tolerance."

[30] -El Museo Nacional de Etnografía y Folklore, La Paz, Bolivia in partnership with Museo de las Americas, Denver, Colorado.

-National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan in partnership with National Constitution Center, Philadelphia.

-Dushanbe Zoo, Dushanbe, Tajikistan in partnership with Blake Pine Animal Park, Albion, Indiana.

-Ben M'sik Community Museum, Casablanca, Morocco in partnership with the KSU Museum, Kennesaw, GA.

-LVR-Industriemuseum, Oberhausen, Germany in partnership with Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg, PA.

-Parco Astronomico Infinito, Pino Torinese, Italy in partnership with Sci-Port: Louisiana's Science Center, Shreveport, LA.

-Ainu Association of Hokkaido, Sapporo, Japan in partnership with Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, Seattle, WA.

-Bendery City Museum of Ethnography & Natural History, Bendery, Moldova in partnership with Reger Ehnstrom Nature Center, Wahpeton, ND.



teams worked together in a very cordial and amiable atmosphere. I honestly believe that such exchange programs are an important step in bringing people of different cultures, continents, religions and historical backgrounds together to promote peace and trust and eradicate prejudice and bigotry. About this rich experience, Wafaa Afkir, a member of the Moroccan delegation, writes:

Yes, we are different yet we can love each other, we can live with each other. After all, we are all Allah's children. Before this trip, I considered everything to be either black or white. If we don't think alike, we don't worship the same God, we don't share the same values or principles, we will not be able to understand each other! That was silly!!

At the end, I would like to thank anybody who participated in the success of this project my dear coach Professor Samir El Azhar, Dr. Catherine Lewis, Dr. Jennifer Dickey, KSU and BMCM teams. Special thanks to the MCCA organization for making the dream to visit the United States come true.

Youssef Fdilal, another member of the Ben M'sik delegation, states:

In the museums we visited, ranging from American history to Air Space, we were in awe in front of the professionalism and talent shown in displaying, interpreting and preserving the artifacts. Having free admission to some of the worldwide legendary museums and historical monuments in Kennesaw, Atlanta, and Washington D.C. was an experience full of learning and sensations. Dr. Jennifer Dickey, the brilliant public historian, was very impressive whenever she started talking about the history of each of the colossal buildings we visited.

Not only did the trip enlighten me about the hospitality and sociability of the American people, but it also taught me about their open mindedness and their eagerness to discover other cultures and civilizations.

My trips to the United States of America were a remarkable experience. I have met wonderful people. They have opened their houses and their hearts to me. Every encounter was an occasion to exchange academic as well as hu-

man experiences. Throughout my visits, I felt a sincere and earnest willingness to strengthen cultural relationships between Morocco and the United States. In fact, both trips were an opportunity to promote cultural diversity and to consolidate “people-to-people diplomacy”. The two parties, the American and the Moroccan, strive to develop bonds of friendship between students, scholars and community members of our respective countries.

In this article, I have tried to present the ways Moroccans, three university professors, perceive the United States of America. We have visited America in different periods of time and each one of us has recorded his impressions and attitudes in different languages. Dr. Soulami visited U.S.A. in the sixties of the previous century and wrote about his trip in Arabic. Mr. Youssef El Alamy visited U.S.A. in the nineties and published a book about his New York trip in French. In April 2009 and April 2010, I visited the U.S. and recorded my experiences in English. Regardless of time and language, our different trips to the United States have opened new horizons of hope and firm belief in the future. In addition to this, I have included some Moroccan students’ testimonies. They believe that the joint program “Creating Community: the Casablanca-Kennesaw Project” allowed them to overcome cultural barriers and build everlasting friendships with the American students. Moreover, their perception of the U.S is now based on interaction and experience and not shaped by the biased ideological accounts of the media. I do therefore believe that cultural programs can dissipate mistrust, tension and stereotypes. President Obama, in his address to the Muslim World from Cairo, stressed the importance of cultural exchanges between U.S.A. and the Muslim countries:

On education, we will expand exchange programs, and increase scholarships, like the one that brought my father to America..... At the same time, we will encourage more Americans to study in Muslim communities. And we will match promising Muslim students with internships in America; invest in online learning for teachers and children around the world; and create a new online network, so a young person in Kansas can communicate instantly with a young person in Cairo.<sup>[31]</sup>

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[31] Barack Obama, REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT ON A NEW BEGINNING, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009.