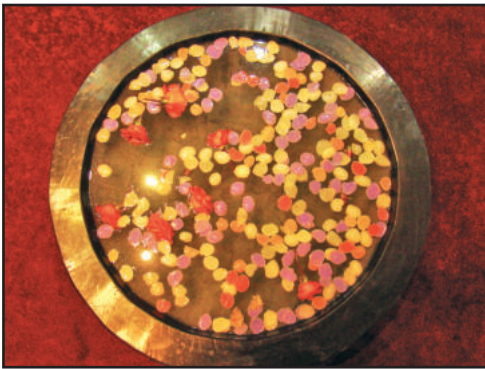


# Floating Rose Petals to Opening Doors

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Floating Rose Petals

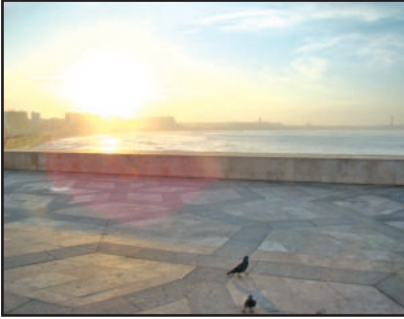
This image of rose petals floating on the surface of a body of water reaches back into my own nostalgic reflections on my college years at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. There was a cloister with a fountain, reproduced in a

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Moroccan style, just outside the Annie Russell Theatre. The entire campus is a lovely contemporary interpretation of Moorish architectural design. On breaks from work in the performance hall, I would gravitate to this fountain, partly because of its beauty no doubt, but also because of its potential to float whatever kind of flower petal I was able to get my hands upon that day. One can call it naïve romanticism, or maybe even align it to some legitimate sense of mysticism. . . it was a ritual of aesthetics that called upon my yearning to be as far from the “day to day” world as I could possibly travel in that given moment. The demands of the theatre kept me close to the location, but the lilted rise on the water lent a passing allusion to a Moroccan mystique. There is really nothing wrong with that kind of escapism, even this summer on the big screen as Sarah Jessica Parker, and other ladies of Sex and the City fame, ride camels in diaphanous clothing across the Sahara (stilettos and all). Yet, after visiting a few Moroccan cities this past winter with part of the Creating Community team, I can now say these are all just surface associations with Moroccan culture... this Western fixation on the allusive “mystique” and “charm” outweighs the real treasure of our shared humanity. Our “humanness” is actually one of our best qualities... of course that depends on how you frame it.

I address the next photo in my collection of frames as Mahgreb on the Mahgreb . For me it forces a memory of standing on the beach in South Florida as a very young and quite impressionable six year old. Like my Moroccan colleagues, I too am a child of the Atlantic. I distinctly recall looking across the ocean thinking about who was on the other side. Little did I know that one day I would have the opportunity to find out and to dispel the stereotypical imagery that Warner Brother’s reels evoked – the half barrel of cannibals floating toward my home on the tossing waves. That was about all I could discern concerning Africa at that time based upon available resources. While new visions of whom the people might be on the other side of that ocean emerged, I did not form a true working knowledge of what it meant to be Moroccan until I met this community “face to face” on my journey to Casablanca in December 2009.



Mahgreb on the Mahgreb



Members of the Creating Community team

In the city of Casablanca, the Kennesaw travelers began our working relationship with the Moroccan team, growing from a somewhat awkward working of their system (eating cous-cous from the wrong section on the plate) to a more relevant expression of invitation to dispel our misconceptions of one another. By broadening our definitions of systems, we scoped new ways of recognizing boundaries and clarifications, and thus created new avenues for problem solving between systems. At the opening ceremony we spoke about the history of the Creating Community project and of the success of the partnership between our institutions. On behalf of our traveling group, I owned the truth that Americans have not always behaved very well in interactions with the Muslim world in general. In the same breath, I also hoped to communicate that Americans do not agree on ways to behave in any matters. Even within our little group of five travelers there was much diversity. While the group reflected a unified intent to develop historical and cultural knowledge, we were in fact a mixed bunch - a middle aged art professor, a young African-American mother of two, a “tried and true” baseball enthusiast, a skeptical atheist with a heart of gold, and an ardent lover of all creatures “four-legged” (especially cats). Each of us had different strengths and weaknesses, and we hoped to get to know as many of our new Moroccan friends as authentically as possible.



View from Casablanca, illustrating the city's desire to revere its past while projecting great plans for a promising future

One of the most striking opportunities for this kind of cross-cultural exchange occurred on our first “cultural trip” to the Masjid of Hassan II. The building itself is a spectacular monument to Islamic ingenuity. Partly suspended over the crashing waves of the Atlantic, this traditional prayer space is flanked by a tower minaret that reaches 689ft (210m) into the sky. Many of the white marble spaces of the masjid are decorated with a geometric relief carving or an indigenous pieced mosaic decoration called “zellij”. The building was commissioned by King Hassan II, designed by French architect, Michel Pinseau, and built by over 35,000 craftsmen. Completed in 1993, the building can hold over 25,000 people. It exceeds this limit during the holy month of Ramadan when the surrounding concrete plateau is overwhelmed by its own sea of worshippers.

On the day of our excursion, that same plateau served as a soccer ground for a set of young boys, a meeting place for teenagers, a strolling space for extended families, and for our own little group of developing friends - a prime spot from which to watch the fading sun sink into the ocean. A natural halqah, or circle of people, formed with our little group of Americans and Moroccans as we exchanged cultural intricacies. In truth, we were just as curious about their lives and patterns as they were of our own.

According to the writings of anthropologist, Frederick Gearing, all people within systems carry a particular cognitive mapping which is based upon prior experience (Gearing, 1984). In Gearing's cultural transmission model, these mappings are posited against one another in order to forge "equivalences," or the kinds of "fits" between maps (Gearing, 1984, p.29). He suggests that there are four distinct cognitive realms that determine whether any two mappings are "fit" or "ill-fit" - including the setting, the understanding of the nature of things, a social identity and an implied agenda (p.30). Given the fluctuation of elements within this formula, the very idea of fixing upon a general cultural perception seems far-fetched; yet, the questions regarding the "fit" of the generated ideas can attest to a harmony, and thus a convergence of thought. The dyadic dance also will expose irreconcilable dissonance. This imagery of the dyadic dance illuminates the second aspect of cultural transmission, that of the actual "transaction" between the "old hands" and the "newcomers" (Gearing, 1975, p.4).



Learning about each other, meant exchanging ideas, recipes, and sports' lore. It also meant visiting cultural sites and understanding the artifacts within their natural contexts.

Our second cultural outing took us to Samir's hometown, Rabat and its historical surroundings. We were honored (if not literally blessed) to have guided

tours of ancient sites, including Classical, Byzantine and Islamic structures that stood side by side for centuries. These settings helped to bring an understanding of the tolerance within the dominant society of Morocco – proud of its long reputation as a crossroads culture, informed by all of the peoples who inhabited the lands at different and simultaneous periods in history. Later in the same day we would leave for Marakesh, where the “Two Yusefs” (students from the American Studies Program at Ben M’sik) would relate the history of this rich region, along with the appropriate myths and legends that surround it. Perhaps this was the kind of setting that I had expected of Morocco – complete with camels, snake charmers, fortune tellers and of course a bustling open market. Judging by the way the henna painters besieged our unsuspecting blonds on the trip, it is fair to say that we were just as exotic to them as they were to us – Americans traveling through Marakesh during the economic travails of the early 21st century. A merchant in the covered suk ran to meet us when he heard that we were from America. He shook my hand gracefully and told us how happy he was to see Americans back in Marakesh. He told us to send more Americans his way, especially with their “American money”. This area certainly has sustained a long history of relations with our nation, and it is probably safe to assume that the exotic stereotypes that emerge from this area help sustain a very healthy commercial investment for camel drivers, water bearers, and monkey handlers.



Camel without stilettos



The most expensive photo I have ever taken

Coming back to the university at Ben M’Sik, the “old hand” and “new hand” roles reversed. Each of the Kennesaw travelers had an opportunity to present a topic to various American Studies classes. The goal of these presenta-

tions was to present an “old-hand” informational sessions on topics related to American culture. These ranged from the history of religion in America to a survey on hip-hop music from the Atlanta area. The presentations were received well and gave our new friends an authentic description of the culture they had only studied, and not experienced. Jay delivered a description of

America’s (or at least Atlanta’s) favorite sport, baseball. This lecture included a brief history of the game and the basic rules used when playing on the field. We hoped that Jay might have thrown a few pitches to the newly inducted fielders, but time did not allow for this “game of all games”.

Here Jay delivers a description of his favorite pastime to students in American Studies classes



The Moroccan’s unfamiliarity with American culture would change as part of the “Creating Community” project. The Moroccan delegation from Ben M’sik was able to join the Kennesaw research team for a similar type of cultural immersion trip in April 2010. Again, the role of “old hands” and “new hands” would reverse. After losing one member in Paris mid-trip (due to a lack of one page of entry documentation) and then almost losing another due to U.S. Homeland Security zealotness, our new friends settled down for the night in a local hotel. The next morning they would meet the rest of the Kennesaw team at an opening meeting, led by the project’s principal investigator Dr. Catherine Lewis. The



agenda centered on what had already been accomplished at both research sites and projected forward to brainstorm potential applications of the interview findings. The two faculty from Morocco were able to present several times within Dr. Dickey's public history classes, while the three students presented on basic precepts of the Islamic faith within my art criticism course (in preparation for a cross-cultural visual inquiry of the Hassan II Masjid). Khalifah, Wafa, and Yousef provided different perspectives on Islam, helping to reinforce the major theme of the project at large - Islam is not monolithic, and in fact one's personal vision of Islam is formed as a result of several factors including sect orientation, social status, gender, and cultural origins (to mention a few variables). Even within this small group of students there were differing views as to the purpose of the veiling of women, the interpretation of the Qu'ran and even the idea of what a modern Islamic society should look like. Members of the KSU Muslim Student Association also attended the Moroccan students' roundtable presentation and added their own spin on the developing themes. Such "dissonance" added to my own students' comprehension of Islam within Moroccan culture, providing a more solid foundation for their visual inquiry the Masjid of Hassan II.



Opening meeting in Kennesaw



Dr. Dibich presenting to a public history class in April 2010

The opportunity to play the role of "old hands" regarding Georgia culture reached its peak during the group's commemoration ceremony arranged at the Capital. After meeting very briefly with our current governor, Sonny Perdue, we explored the renovated Capital building with our internal guide, Dr. Dickey. I think it is fair to say that the historians on the trip, including Dr. Dibich of Mo-



rocco, had a stronger handle on the prerequisite knowledge needed to fully appreciate this visit than myself. Being a native Floridian, my command of Georgia history is certainly lacking. It was Dr. Dbich who requested a photo of the touring group beneath the famous bust of James Oglethorpe, Georgia's founding father. Later we would pass in front of a portrait of Martin Luther King, and Dr. El Azhar Samir and two students posed before it. Samir had mentioned this civil rights leader several times in conversations, both in Morocco and Georgia. King no doubt is an important figurehead in the Moroccan American Studies Program at Ben M'sik, particularly as the election of Obama as our U.S. President remains an important topic in international news within Muslim countries. Obama's success in the 2008 election is viewed in Morocco as a victorious outcome of King's civil right's movement.



Touring the Georgia State Capital Building and Museum.



The principal activity of the day, however, would be in the afternoon. The culmination of the project would be staged as a Coffee and Conversation event. In the process of collecting information regarding Muslims living in the South, certain interviewees had astounding stories to tell and an audience larger than our research group seemed immediately appropriate. A public forum had been

established in partnership with several Muslim organizations, including our own university's Muslim Student Association. The MSA President, Ali Abedi, began the event after our Moroccan student guest, Yousef, chanted psalmodic selections from the Qu'ran. The goal of these two young men was to share their heritage and beliefs with a larger community, so that the individual stories of the speaking participants would have more contextual support and consequentially a more resounding effect on the gathered audience of Muslims and Non-Muslims. Again, the theme regarding a lack of monolithic thinking came to the front of the discussion as the individual storytellers gave personal accounts of their own experiences regarding Islam in America.



The Creating Community Coffee and Conversations event

Happily, this is not the end of our cultural exchange. It is really just an opening door. The university at Ben M'sik has requested help in establishing their new arts programming (enlisting the aid of visual arts and theatre faculty from KSU). This will be the first program of its kind at the public university system of Morocco. Future collaborations may also include an NEH Institute at the Ben M'sik campus in summer 2012. A potential theme for this projected seminar has been discussed – Casablanca: myths, movies and manipulations. The intent of the project is to disarm surface level associations concerning the city of Casablanca, constructed via famous American movies. Ultimately, the faculty discourse will lead to an unveiling of the “real” city of Casablanca through its histories and contemporary aspirations. Visual culture objects scrutinized in this study include: Bergman and Bogart's 1942 film, *Casablanca*; *Road to Morocco*, a 1942 film, *Road to Morocco* with Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy

Lamour; The Marx Brothers' 1946 film, *A Night in Casablanca*, and perhaps Woody Allen's 1972 film, *Play it Again Sam*. Faculty from the KSU theatre and visual arts programs will work with the Ben M'sik American Studies Program at Casablanca and KSU, hopefully fulfilling a mutual desire to bridge the gulf between our cultures.

