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# *Roundtable: Museums Collaboration*

## Exploring *Identities*: Public History in a Cross-Cultural Context

CATHERINE LEWIS, JENNIFER DICKEY,  
SAMIR EL AZHAR, and JULIA BROCK

**Abstract:** The Museums Connect program, funded by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by the American Alliance of Museums, is a relatively new effort to connect international museums; the grant is set apart by its objective to sponsor projects that foster cross-cultural professional development and civic engagement in global communities. The following roundtable includes perspectives on the Museums Connect project *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context*, undertaken by the Museum of History and Holocaust Education, Kennesaw State University (Georgia), and the Ben M'sik Community Museum, Université Hassan II Mohammedia, Ben M'sik (Casablanca, Morocco).

**Key words:** international public history, new media, public history education, community engagement, cultural diplomacy

### *Introduction*

AS THE FIELD OF PUBLIC HISTORY takes an international turn, some of its most compelling organizations and projects have been those that connect museums, historic sites, or cultural agencies across the globe in efforts to critically examine, preserve, and memorialize the past. The former Museums and Community Collaborations Abroad (MCCA) program (now Museums Con-

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Hands of Moroccan and U.S. *Identities* project team members after receiving henna (ink) designs in Casablanca, December, 2011. (Photo by MHHE Education and Outreach Coordinator Richard Harker)

nect), funded by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by the American Alliance of Museums (the Alliance), is a relatively new effort to connect international museums. Museums Connect<sup>1</sup> is set apart by its objectives to sponsor projects that foster civic engagement in global communities and to facilitate cross-cultural professional development in the museum field. From the perspective of the State Department, these partnerships also serve a soft diplomatic purpose: they are part of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' efforts to create "people-to-people diplomacy."

Coupling their own aims to the civic engagement and professionalization purposes of Museums Connect, public historians in Atlanta, Georgia, and Casablanca, Morocco, have constructed a collaborative online exhibition, *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context*, that explores identity and history in both communities.<sup>2</sup> Through a continuing Museums Connect grant,<sup>3</sup> the Museum of History and Holocaust Education (MHHE), Kennesaw State University (KSU), Georgia, and the Ben M'sik Community

1. [http://www.aam-us.org/resources/international/Museums Connect](http://www.aam-us.org/resources/international/Museums%20Connect)

2. [www.marb.kennesaw.edu/identities](http://www.marb.kennesaw.edu/identities)

3. The MHHE and BMCM received an initial Museums Connect grant in 2009 to work on a project entitled "Creating Community Collaboration." In the first grant, project teams collected

Museum (BMCM), Université Hassan II Mohammedia, Ben M'sik (Casablanca, Morocco), enlisted forty students<sup>4</sup> to take photographs, write histories of their communities, and gather suggestions from local stakeholders during the initial production stages of the exhibit. The students also drew content from oral histories supported by an earlier Museums Connect grant received by the MHHE and BMCM in 2009. As the participants and sponsors had anticipated, the *Identities* project produced more than the exhibition. As teams from the two sites traveled together in Morocco and the U.S. to deepen understanding of their respective communities, participated in workshops on exhibit design, mounted the exhibit, and collaborated with one another and their larger communities, the process became an important “product” in itself. We had intended, and promised in accepting the second Museums Connect award, to create a replicable model for international museum partnership. The following roundtable features and contributes to that aim, rejoining in reflection the perspectives of the Moroccan and American historians who directed the project. Each contributor speaks in some way about the challenges of and lessons learned from our transatlantic collaboration. Catherine Lewis provides an overview of the first Museums Connect grant received by the MHHE and BMCM in 2009; Jennifer Dickey focuses on incorporating international work into KSU's public history program; Samir El Azhar speaks to the challenges of museum work in Morocco and how the grant aided in the BMCM's mission as a community museum; and Julia Brock adds details on the *Identities* exhibit and the challenges of coordinating an international project. The end result, we hope, will be a balance of perspective that introduces readers to the complexities and joys of international collaboration and exposes them to one potential source of funding for such projects.

The BMCM, Morocco's first community museum, was founded in 2006 by faculty at University Hassan II with the mission “to preserve memory by interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of the neighborhood and its region.” In this mission, the BMCM is unique in Morocco. Moroccan museums are not numerous; there are fewer than twenty museums nationally, and the BMCM is only one of two located in Casablanca. Unlike traditional Moroccan museums that primarily collect and display antiquities and works of art, the BMCM specifically seeks to document the day-to-day lives of local residents. The museum's aims originate in the distinctive historical character of the community. Ben M'sik is the most densely populated and impoverished of Casablanca's six districts. It has long been a destination for successive waves of migrants—most recently from the drought-stricken Chaouia and Doukala regions of Morocco. The cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of this neighborhood is great, and such differences are echoed in the Arabic, Berber, and French languages spoken by its resi-

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oral histories in Ben M'sik and Atlanta, hosted “coffee and conversation” programs, and conducted public history workshops via Skype.

4. Ten students were from KSU and thirty from Hassan II.

dents. The BMCM strives to become a place where, through the articulation of a shared history and place, different voices and views might be heard.

The Museum of History and Holocaust Education began at KSU in 2003 as the Holocaust Education Program (HEP), administratively based in the Department of History and Philosophy in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Initially the museum's focus was on World War II and the persecution of Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime. In 2008, the HEP became the Museum of History and Holocaust Education and expanded its mission to a more inclusive emphasis on promoting greater cultural awareness, tolerance, and diversity. The fears and ignorance that generated the genocide of seventy years ago did not end with that war; hardly a corner of the world today is free of the crippling prejudices that prevent us from reaching our full potential as global citizens, including the corner occupied by northwest Georgia. As Muslim American communities grow in metro Atlanta, we hoped to provide a counterpoint to the often extreme and fear-based portrayal of Islam in our community.

### ***Building an International Partnership***

CATHERINE LEWIS

THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 9/11 TERRORIST ATTACKS passed in 2011, but we are only now beginning to understand the ways in which the world has changed. Islamophobia in the United States continues to grow, as evidenced by research conducted by the Pew Research Center that found that, since 2005, positive opinions of Islam have declined.<sup>5</sup> Prolonged wars with Iraq and Afghanistan and controversies over the construction of an Islamic cultural center and mosque near the former site of the World Trade Center have fueled stereotypes, intolerance, and misinformation about the Islamic world and Muslims in America in visible and troubling ways. In this context, the MHHE in Kennesaw, Georgia, twenty miles north of Atlanta, embarked on an innovative initiative through the Museums Connect program, which is funded by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by the American Alliance of Museums. The MHHE undertook *Identities* with the sense of location in metro Atlanta, a city that prides itself on its civil rights legacy and growing diversity but that has witnessed acts of intolerance towards Muslims. We felt that the issues that contributed to the Holocaust—extremism, religious intolerance, and violence—resonated in this political climate.

The partnership between the MHHE and the BMCM began in 2008, though there had already been dialogue between the museums' host univer-

5. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Public Remains Conflicted Over Islam," August 24, 2010, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1706/poll-americans-views-of-muslims-object-to-new-york-islamic-center-islam-violence> (accessed July 6, 2012).

sities about a more institution-wide collaboration between our arts and humanities faculties. In that year, the MHHE partnered with the BMCM to create a ten-panel exhibition that outlined the history of Casablanca and Ben M'sik (the exhibit is on display at the BMCM). Drawing upon our work together, and recognizing that our experience with the traveling exhibition could serve further projects well, we elected to apply for funding that would further strengthen our partnership. In the project funded by our first Museums Connect grant, "Creating Community Collaboration," we invited students, faculty, and staff at the BMCM to accept a challenging task: to see past the lens of a volatile political environment and the influence of an incendiary media that too easily limits our cultural and moral perspectives. By collaborating together on an oral history project related to each museum's respective community, the MHHE and BMCM identified misperceptions about Islam and about the West, learned to listen to alternative points of view, and, on the American front, educated themselves about Islam. Between 2009 and 2010, these two museums gathered over sixty oral histories from their local neighbors, hosted dialogue-based "Coffee and Conversation" programs with students and community members, and learned about life experiences of Muslims living in the U.S. South as well as Moroccan Muslims in the largely immigrant community of Ben M'sik.

The goals of the first Museums Connect grant were providing cross-cultural education as well as building historical resources and fostering civic engagement. Although both American and Moroccan teams engaged in the same activities—recording oral histories, offering public discussion forums, traveling to each other's historic sites—each team's objectives were slightly different. The MHHE team focused on engaging an audience in northwest Georgia that is largely uninformed, or ill-informed, about Islam. The BMCM team focused on promoting community self-awareness and pride through the creation of Morocco's first community museum and recording oral histories of local residents whose voices have been marginalized. In the process, the BMCM showcased Moroccan cultures by spreading knowledge about the diversity to be found within a single neighborhood in Casablanca. Travel by student teams to Casablanca and to Georgia and Washington, D.C., only strengthened the immersive cultural experiences for participants.

For decades scholars have argued that traditional concepts of what a museum is and how it should operate should no longer be left to the discretion of an elite few. Energized by these debates, museum constituencies have begun to claim that they should take an active role in deciding how museums interpret individual and community experiences.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, the first grant sought to gather, analyze, and learn from the voices of lived experience and give those individuals a chance to shape the way their history is told. The oral history project was not intended to cultivate new visitors for two muse-

6. Catherine Lewis, "From Temple to Forum," in *The Changing Face of Public History* (DeKalb: University of Northern Illinois Press, 2005), 5.

ums, but to create a vehicle by which residents living near both institutions could have extended conversations about topics relevant to their lives and the history of their neighborhood, community, or city. Our hope was that this dialogue would help both museums change the way they engage with and represent community history by relying upon local voices instead of assumptions and stereotypes. Indeed, both museums have continued to reach out to their communities through “Conversations with the Curator” programs (MHHE) and focus groups (MHHE and BMCM), as well as by conducting community-wide surveys (BMCM).

“Creating Community Collaboration” had unique features, but oral history projects focused on the Muslim community inside and outside the United States provided inspiration and ideas.<sup>7</sup> These were important efforts, although none of them had sought to work in an international and collaborative context. Our vision was also informed by a statement made at the 1991 International Council of Museums conference, and never more pertinent than today:

As the main role of education is to deal with problems of the heritage of the past, we must ask how they are going to affect our own future . . . and in this way to move from giving answers, giving explanations, giving more data, giving more information about a certain exhibition, to the raising of new questions, to the raising of doubts, to the encouragement of skepticism about what we are going to see.<sup>8</sup>

We were in new territory on both continents as we embarked on international exploration, and we believed that the structure and outcomes of this project would make it a replicable model for other museum-community partnerships. The ensuing exchange between the two museums and their communities ultimately led to increased knowledge about each other’s cultural traditions and a heightened sense of community engagement. Our project team members were bound together by a single project with a shared purpose (and deadline)—our success was measured in conversations and reflection, and in our ability to develop a common language created through project work. In addition, members of both communities became aware of the many ways in which Morocco and the U.S. are similar. Despite the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric of East vs. West, Muslim vs. Christian, both teams found commonalities between their histories, traditions, faiths, and customs. Notably, both Kennesaw and Casablanca are “melting pots” of varied races, ethnicities, re-

7. For example, the Documentation Center of Cambodia completed “Promoting Genocide Education and Reconciliation through Oral History: The Case of Cham Muslim Youth in Cambodia” in 2008. Filmmaker Nsenga Knight conducted oral histories with Sunni Muslim women in Brooklyn in 2007 for a project entitled, “As the Veil Turns: Female Pioneers of the American Muslim Community.” Dr. Ken Scholl, of the history department at the University of Memphis, conducted “Integration through Education: Muslims of Memphis and America.” The Teachers College of Columbia University recently published *Where I Need To Be: Oral History of Muslim Youth in New York City*. The Oral History Association organized a panel around a film, “An Oral History of Islam in Pittsburgh” at its 2008 meeting.

8. International Council of Museums, Conference proceedings, Committee on Education and Cultural Action, “The Museum and the Needs of the People,” 1992, 62.



ligions, and cultures, and as such both locations are excellent sites from which to engage in cross-cultural bridge building and education through dialogue.

The success of our first grant was recognized by the American Alliance of Museums in an invitation by Museums Connect staff to apply for a continuing grant in 2010 (for the 2011–2012 grant cycle). The second grant focused on the creation of an online exhibition, *Identities*, that disseminated the information gathered during the first grant cycle. We also used Skype and Facebook to facilitate a “train the trainer” component that would prepare project members on both sides of the Atlantic to educate others about cross-cultural and community-based museum partnerships. This element has further engaged the interviewees, their communities, and the students, faculty, and staff members at the two museums, while enabling education to continue through museum-sponsored programming and exhibition, education, and dialogue.

While the first grant phase established a knowledge base and rapport between the teams and communities of Kennesaw and Ben M’sik, the second grant focused on the specific kinds of identity-formations in both cultures, as well as the intentional collaboration with community members in the development of exhibit content. Whereas the community exhibit at BMCM and both institutions’ “Coffee and Conversation” events discussed Muslim and immigrant life, the online exhibition invited community input through focus groups during the creation phase. We hoped that the exhibition would not only be *about* community, but created in partnership *with* the community. Unfortunately, not all of the focus groups we hosted in both countries were well attended (an important lesson for student participants that community engagement is not always the ideal we hope it to be). In Kennesaw, several members of the university Muslim Student Association assisted, but we were not able to gain widespread participation in the creation phase.

The biggest successes of the project, which my fellow collaborators will speak to, were providing a unique opportunity for international student work, building trust between staff and students, and creating manageable goals for project outcomes. The latter consideration is especially important; it was tempting to create a multifaceted project that, given restrictions of time and space, was simply not feasible (and staff at the Alliance were quick to point out our overreach). We proposed for the first grant, for example, that we would collect a total of 120 oral histories and then craft an exhibit from those stories; we assumed that such a project would make our application competitive. We soon learned, however, that Museums Connect staff prefers depth of engagement rather than breadth of content. When we curtailed project activities to focus on accessible work in our home communities and to use new media and travel to collaborate on project outcomes with our international partners, we were able to meet our project deadlines at the end of each grant cycle. The two projects were not without unforeseen challenges, however. We had to remain patient when confronted with the vagaries of technology and the visa application process, as well as allow extra time for each activity (such as collecting student photographs). Furthermore, to avoid the loss of mo-



mentum, our teams had to remain in constant conversation, which was helped along by a project blog and by Facebook. Now having reached completion, we are more than happy with the results of the *Identities* project. We've created a resource that expands the missions of both museums, and have solidified an already strong partnership. The focus on historical and subjective identity allowed for an inventive way to showcase place, perspective, and culture in an online exhibition, a format increasingly used by museums, giving students real exposure to the benefits of the medium.

Community response to the final exhibition, and even to related press about the project during our year of work, also exposed students to a spectrum of audience reception. Though we had encouragement and support from KSU and members of the Muslim American community, some community reactions reflected the fear of Islam that exists in Cobb County (where KSU is located). One man wrote a scathing letter to the editor of the *Marietta Daily Journal* (the flagship newspaper of Cobb County) after the paper published a short press release about the MHHE's receipt of the Museums Connect grant. Incensed that his "tax dollars" had gone to support the project, he decried what he saw as an indefensible project goal—outreach to the Muslim American community.<sup>9</sup> Several anonymous respondents replied in the comments section; one commenter wrote, "Everything I know about Islam I learned from 9/11." Though others left supportive remarks, the most vocal replies reflected intolerance. We advised students to take note, but the intolerant and misinformed nature of the criticism did little to deter our work.

Negative reactions were echoed when MHHE released promotional materials announcing the exhibition launch in July of 2012. Notably, these responses came not from our immediate locale but from virtual communities. Our story was picked up, for example, by national anti-Islam websites such as CreepingSharia,<sup>10</sup> whose editors act as watchdogs against a perceived threat of terrorism. MHHE staff members received individual e-mail messages (which were copied onto the CreepingSharia comments section) that were not personally threatening but in which the sender demanded to know, for example, why a Holocaust museum would sponsor collaboration with Muslim communities. Rather than engaging such misguided questions, we simply responded with an invitation to dialogue at our exhibition launch in July (no one accepted our offer). We found that once the next news cycle came along, these kinds of responses stopped as new headlines grabbed the attention of site followers. Negative reactions only underscored the importance of promoting dialogue and historic and personal perspectives on Muslim communities in metro Atlanta and Morocco, and they exposed students to the realities of working on public history projects that engage controversial but salient issues.

9. We have archived the original letter to the *Marietta Daily Journal* editor on the *Identities* website; see <http://marb.kennesaw.edu/identities/items/show/864>.

10. [http://creepingsharia.wordpress.com\[0\]](http://creepingsharia.wordpress.com[0])

## *The World is Our Classroom*

JENNIFER DICKEY

*IDENTITIES BUILT UPON AND CREATIVELY EXTENDED* the aims of our public history program at Kennesaw State University as it furthered new means and media for the two museums and universities. KSU is the third-largest unit of the university system in Georgia, and it takes great pride in its emphasis on international programs and partnerships. More than one hundred nations are represented in the student body, and KSU is recognized as a leader in international education among the thirty-five schools in the statewide university system. It is natural, therefore, that the Public History Program at KSU should play a role in fostering international collaboration with the *Identities* project. Public history at KSU is offered as an undergraduate certificate program that trains students to think critically about the public presentation of history and culture and helps students develop tangible skills that will enable them to pursue graduate study in the field as well as professional work at historic and cultural sites. Students in the program are required to take six public-history-related courses, including an internship that provides them with real-world experience. In almost all cases, the students emerge from the program, if not transformed, certainly with a great appreciation for the practice of public history and a new-found respect for the importance of what I call history on the landscape—the museums and historic markers and sites from which most of the public learns about the past. I feel fortunate to be the facilitator for this experience and am grateful to be part of a team that has helped create opportunities that are well beyond the expectations of our students, such as the opportunities for collaboration with our partner institution in Casablanca, Morocco.

The MHHE serves as a laboratory for students in the public history program, and the *Identities* project fit within that model with the added bonus of offering the students an opportunity for international collaboration. As part of their coursework, students routinely curate traveling exhibitions for the MHHE and help develop curriculum materials to accompany the exhibitions. Public history students also assist with public programs and serve as docents and interns. As the coordinator of the Public History Program, I help facilitate volunteer and internship opportunities at the museum, so I was a principal student “recruiter” for our Museums Connect project. The grant allowed the MHHE to offer students an experience beyond what we could provide through the classroom or in our traditional internship experiences—they were afforded an opportunity to engage with students and faculty from our partner institution in an effort to reach out to new constituencies in both the United States and Morocco. In the process, they developed an appreciation for the challenges and rewards of cross-cultural exchange as well as an enhanced awareness of the impact and perception of America, both good and bad, in the world. Many of the students developed friendships with their Moroccan counterparts that will likely last for the rest of their lives.

The students also built tangible skills that will serve them as they move into their careers. During the first Museums Connect grant, for example, student teams focused on collecting oral histories. Although a few of the students who participated in the project had taken an oral history course, most of them had not, so we incorporated training in the practice of conducting oral histories for the project participants. The workshops were intensive and made more complex because we were conducting them in concert with our Moroccan partners via Skype. But the students were enthusiastic, and by the end of the project, each project team had conducted thirty interviews. One of our early takeaways from this experience was that Skype does not work well with low bandwidth. Though our students were excited finally to put faces and voices with the names of their Moroccan counterparts, we all became frustrated with the “freeze-frame” effect caused by the poor Internet connection at Hassan II. Still, the students on both teams were enthusiastic. They read their assignments in advance, asked meaningful questions, and worked hard to become accomplished oral historians in a very short period of time. In the second grant, the Moroccan and American students participated in workshops on drafting exhibit concept statements, conducting community focus groups, exhibit design, and collections management and care. The project truly gave public history education a global reach (and in a country in which museum training is largely nonexistent).

The fieldwork generated by these workshops served as content for our *Identities* site. The website has multiple components, including oral history excerpts, student essays, and a photographic exhibition. The photographic exhibition proved to be one of the most illuminating parts of the project and was the chief way we explored our main theme, identity. Inspired by the “Investigating Where We Live” program at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., we sent our students out into the community to take photographs in support of a set of themes that were developed jointly by project members in Morocco and the U.S. Other Museums Connect projects had undertaken similar photographic projects, but this experience was new for our students.<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the themes through a camera lens helped the students look at their environment in a different way; furthermore, Moroccan students captured their communities in a way that no outsider or tourist could have done and thus played an important documentary role in the Ben M’sik neighborhood.<sup>12</sup>

Once the photographs were submitted, students learned how to write captions and how to negotiate tricky issues, like logo design, in a cross-cultural environment. One of our most tense but generative experiences was during

11. “We, the People: Afghanistan, America & the Minority Imprint,” a joint project in 2009 of The National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan, and the National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, PA, is an excellent example. View past and current Museums Connect projects at [http://www.aam-us.org/resources/international/Museums Connect/projects/summaries](http://www.aam-us.org/resources/international/Museums%20Connect/projects/summaries).

12. See our photographic galleries at <http://marb.kennesaw.edu/identities/exhibits/show/photography-project/>.



A market stall in the Marrakech souk (or marketplace). Ali Abedi, a member of the American team, took this shot to represent the concept of tradition, as the souk is one of the oldest in Morocco. (Courtesy of Ali Abedi)

our meeting in Washington, D.C. in March 2012, when representatives from the U.S. and Moroccan delegations tried to resolve the question of the logo for our website. Both teams brought design suggestions to the table, and it quickly became obvious that there was a wide gap between the two sides in terms of design aesthetics—shapes and colors had vastly different meanings for each team. We debated, for example, about whether or not to include representations of our national symbols (such as flags and colors) and of our faiths (such as the crescent and moon) and how best to express visually our values of collaboration and partnership. We finally reached a decision and moved on to other topics, but the temporary logo design impasse reminded everyone of the importance of compromise in collaborative work.

Although the acquisition of tangible skills was undoubtedly beneficial to the students, the opportunity to work with the faculty and students of the BMCM in their community in Morocco and in Washington, D.C. was perhaps the most thrilling part of the project. Nine American students traveled to Morocco over the course of the two grants, an additional six students from each team traveled to Washington in March 2012, and all were forever changed by the experience. During the *Identities* project, one of the KSU students wrote an essay that began, “My upbringing did not prepare me to be a world traveler.”<sup>13</sup> The student recounted how she had lived in a “suburban bubble” her

13. Robyn Gagne, February 2012, personal student essay (in author’s possession).

whole life, rarely even venturing into downtown Atlanta. The *Identities* project afforded this student the opportunity to travel to Morocco, an experience that she could hardly have imagined before joining the project team, and to conduct research, help build a collection, and curate an exhibition in partnership with her Moroccan counterparts.

The trip to Washington was as much a high point as the trip to Morocco had been. For the Moroccan students, this was their first time in the United States. For most of the American students, this was their first time in their nation's capital. While in Washington, we spent our mornings working together on the online exhibit at the Alliance headquarters and the afternoons visiting museums and historic sites in the area. These budding public historians were afforded the chance to observe and inquire into historical representation in one of the most museum- and memorial-rich landscapes in the world. To examine the public works of history in conjunction with their experience building a cross-cultural historical project brought powerful new perspectives to the encounter, and as program coordinator of the KSU Public History Program it was satisfying to witness students exploring the possibilities of international collaboration. I was reminded that for public historians, the world is our classroom, and the possibilities for meaningful exploration and education are magnified exponentially when shared across cultures.

### ***Ben M'sik Community Museum and the Identities Project: Re-defining Museology in Morocco***

SAMIR EL AZHAR

THE BEN M'SIK COMMUNITY MUSEUM (BMCM) is a small museum located at Hassan II University, the College of Arts and Humanities, Ben M'sik, Casablanca, Morocco. The decision to create such a museum in an underserved neighborhood of Casablanca stems from an earnest desire to establish strong ties with the surrounding community. The BMCM is located at the heart of the working-class Ben M'sik neighborhood, the largest, poorest, and most densely populated of Casablanca's six districts. The neighborhood has hosted the biggest slums in Casablanca, which has long been considered a "waiting room" for generations of migrants from all over Morocco who were attracted by the economic boom the city has known since the Second World War. The Ben M'sik neighborhood has therefore become a microcosm of Morocco, where different ethnic groups (Arabs and Amazigh/Berbers) live. Since the 1980s, the government has recognized the needs of this vast and complex community and has worked to improve social conditions by establishing cultural and social institutions in the area. Reda Benkirane, an architect witnessing this urban metamorphosis in Ben M'sik, points out:

Beyond reinforced concrete and land value offered to the last Karyanists [referring to people living in the slums] of Ben M'sik, which fortunately contributes

to the renewal of urban history and culture, Casablanca should reconcile with its memory buried at Ben M'sik and Carrières Centrales [name of one of the biggest slums in Casablanca]. Like its economy and its urbanization, the city has a parallel history, which the official historiography continues to ignore.<sup>14</sup>

The cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of this neighborhood demands the existence of a shared space of representation, a gathering place where different voices can be heard and views can be expressed. It is in this context and perspective that the BMCM was created in 2006. It strives to document the largely forgotten, day-to-day lives of the local residents on the grounds that, as citizens of the Moroccan body politic, their lives and stories are worth capturing. As its mission statement indicates, the BMCM seeks “to preserve memory by interpreting, exhibiting, and promoting the stories and heritage of the diverse populations of its neighborhood and its region.”

It is important to point out that this approach to cultural heritage was relatively new to museum practices in Morocco, where museums have failed to reflect and represent the rich and diverse national cultural heritage in a convincing way.<sup>15</sup> Echerki Dahmali, a museum professional and Secretary General of the Arab ICOM (the International Council of Museums), explains:

Looking at the number of museums and their state, we realize that they reflect neither the Moroccan heritage nor the rich culture of our country. However, Morocco is very rich both in its geology, with different geological eras and their traces, and in its political history, with the different dynasties that ruled Morocco. We lack also regional museums.<sup>16</sup>

It is not surprising that these museums do not attract the Moroccan public. Our museums are deserted institutions. Museum professionals are unanimous on this point: most of the visitors are foreign tourists, university researchers, or specialists in the field. According to Echerki Damali:

The Moroccan does not have this museum culture and prefers . . . to take his children to a park rather than to a museum. Most Moroccans are not familiar with visiting museums. It is not part of our tradition and we are unfortunately not yet aware of the importance of museums.<sup>17</sup>

To investigate the Moroccan perception of museums during the year of our Museums Connect grant, the BMCM conducted a survey in the spring of 2012, which consisted of twenty-eight multiple-choice questions. The survey targeted

14. Reda Benkirane, “Bidonville et recasement, modes de vie à Karyan Ben M'sik (Casablanca).” Author translation from French. [http://www.archipress.org/reda/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=27](http://www.archipress.org/reda/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=81&Itemid=27) (accessed September 2012).

15. There are about thirty museums in Morocco, sixteen of which are run by the Ministry of Culture. For more information, please access [http://www.collectionsdumaroc.com/documentation/musees\\_du\\_Maroc.php](http://www.collectionsdumaroc.com/documentation/musees_du_Maroc.php).

16. Echerki Damali, *Les musées au Maroc, mythe ou réalité: Zoom sur ces espaces de conservation du patrimoine*. Author translation from French. [http://dfrancais.voila.net/musees\\_maroc.html](http://dfrancais.voila.net/musees_maroc.html) (accessed September 2012).

17. Ibid. Author translation from French.

mainly the Ben M'sik residents to document their attitudes, on the one hand, towards arts and culture, and, on the other hand, towards museum practices specifically.<sup>18</sup> It was addressed to different groups in the Ben M'sik neighborhood—namely, children in a primary school (ten to sixteen years old), teenagers in a high school (fifteen to twenty years old), students in the Ben M'sik College of Sciences (eighteen to twenty-eight years old), students in the Ben M'sik College of Arts and Humanities (eighteen to fifty-two years old), students in the Ben M'sik Professional School<sup>19</sup> (eighteen to twenty-seven years old), and adult members of the Ben M'sik community (eighteen to sixty years old). The BMCMM team of students and staff distributed six hundred questionnaires; that is, one hundred for each target group.<sup>20</sup> Though the survey is too lengthy to include here, results are summarized below.<sup>21</sup>

Our survey highlights museum culture in the Ben M'sik neighborhood. The striking fact is that the vast majority of respondents in the six targeted categories (70% of the adult community in Ben M'sik) confessed that they had never been to a museum before. Those who claimed to have visited museums provided names of museums (for example, the Museum of Moroccan Judaism of Casablanca), names of historical monuments (Squala in Essaouira or Hercules' Cave in Tangier), religious places (Hassan II Mosque or the shrine of Moulay Abderrahman), and even names of supermarkets (Morocco Mall or Marjane). To account for their disinterest in museums, they all point to either their parents (44% of respondents) or the school (37% of respondents) for not taking them to visit these cultural institutions. Most also claim that museums are expensive, although, in fact, admittance to all museums managed and run by the Ministry of Culture costs only ten dirhams each (about one dollar). Respondents presuppose that museums are not cheap because, on the one hand, they do not have knowledge about museums and, on the other hand, they seem to be intimidated by these "solemn" places, which are, according to them, associated with the elite. When asked about the people who visit museums, the vast majority suggested highly educated people (just below 50% of all respondents named highly educated people as the most likely to visit museums). Moreover, the different groups surveyed were unable to number and identify the public and private museums in Morocco (80% of adult respondents answered "I do not know"), which stresses the lack of a museum-going tradition. Nevertheless, over half of all participants in each category expressed their eagerness to visit museums in the future, and to acquire more information about museums.

18. The survey was conducted in 2012. To my knowledge, this was the first survey about museum culture conducted in the Ben M'sik neighborhood.

19. This professional school is affiliated with the Moroccan *Office de la Formation Professionnelle et de Promotion du Travail* (OFPPPT), which provides training to students to enable them to get jobs.

20. Special thanks go to the students of the English Department and members of the BMCMM team who distributed the questionnaires throughout the Ben M'sik neighborhood.

21. The survey was conducted in Arabic and translated into English.



Compared to the other forms of art, museums are ranked at the bottom of the respondents' list of interests. We noted a predominance of cinema and video, for example. Furthermore, the majority of respondents prefer a public park to a theater or a museum. This free, open space hosts families whose members are of different generations and engage in different activities such as playing games for children or exchanging social news for adults.

I expected to find big differences in answers between the six categories. To my great surprise, some answers look the same regardless of the age, intellectual levels, or occupation of the respondents. This uniformity could be explained by the absence of adequate cultural policy in this working-class neighborhood to make residents aware of the different venues of cultural production in Morocco and to acquaint them with other, relatively more sophisticated, showcases of cultural heritage and visual arts.

The joint project, *Identities: Understanding Islam in a Cross-Cultural Context*, was a crucial stage in the BMCM's efforts to reach out to our community in order to change their relationship to museums as cultural spaces. We managed to build an online exhibition that explores the history of our communities through a collection of photos and discussion of identity. Unlike the traditional approach of museum practice that is mainly interested in the acquisition and display of artifacts (as with the museums run by the Ministry of Culture), this project focused on social lives of people, which strengthened the BMCM's relationship to its cultural and social environment. The *Identities* project enabled us to engage three audiences: first, most directly, the university students who made up our project teams; second, our broader communities who participated in our surveys and focus groups and who make up our audience of the online exhibit; and third, the community of museum professionals and scholars that we address in papers and conference presentations as we make our project a model for international collaboration. Perhaps the largest impact thus far, however, has been on the students who comprise the museum team. Meryem Bassi, a student-participant in this project, declares:

This experience has taught me several things. It has taught me how to work in a group, and how to work with different mentalities and religious backgrounds to reach one goal.

It has also taught me to see the world in a more optimistic way and that museums are not just about showing artefacts but about telling stories that our ancestors could not tell.<sup>22</sup>

The partnership with Kennesaw State University and its affiliated museum, the MHHE, was a good exercise in museum practice that is helping to shape the state of the museum field in Morocco. Thanks to the Museums Connect grant, the BMCM is leading the way in shifting to a public-based role for museums. Williams College scholar Katarzyna Pieprzak noted the changes caused by the

22. Meryem Bassi, personal student essay, March 2012 (in author's possession).

work of the BMCM: “While large museums in Morocco struggle to redefine their founding missions and become relevant structures in public life, the Ben M’Sik Community Museum plays the crucial role of re-defining museology in Morocco and making sure that neighborhoods are not forgotten.”<sup>23</sup>

To conclude, our transatlantic collaboration opened new perspectives for both museums. It also helped to raise awareness of the need to change museum practices in Morocco. In operating from the margin, the BMCM draws attention to the need to preserve the rich and diverse cultural heritage of these underserved neighborhoods. Change is a long and complex process, but we are confident that we have at least made a good start. As the Arab proverb says: “The rain starts with a single drop.”

### ***Managing International Public History Work***

JULIA BROCK

AS COORDINATOR OF THE *IDENTITIES* PROJECT, it was my task to oversee the administration of the grant, guide the development of the online exhibit, and aid in the planning of our trips to Morocco in December of 2011 and Washington, D.C., in March of 2012. Coming in a bit late to the project (students had already been chosen and a general outline of the project had been drafted), I started in September of 2011, just as the American students had begun working on an assignment to document local response to the tenth anniversary of the September 11th attacks (the assignment was eventually to become a section in our online exhibit). Our first discussions together as a group were largely exploratory; though we all knew that the outcome of the year’s work would be an online exhibition, we could barely imagine its final form and content. We, along with our Moroccan colleagues, moved forward with a broadly experimental and open attitude towards the work and to what we might discover from the partnership.

We facilitated our transatlantic discussions during the year via a Wordpress site, Facebook, and Skype (in English—the Moroccan students are fluent and were all enrolled in the American Studies program at Hassan II). We used Skype to hold workshops on conducting focus groups and drafting exhibit concept statements, as well as to discuss our photography project in more depth. Though, as Jennifer Dickey notes, our signals were compromised by uneven bandwidth speeds, the Skype conversations allowed us to introduce ourselves and have “real-time” conversations, which did much to further communication on the blog. In our blog threads we refined ideas for the exhibit photography project and for collecting other data to be included on the site. Later, we also weighed in collectively about the site’s design and development. Cre-

23. Katarzyna Pieprzak, “Participation as Patrimony: The Ben M’sik Community Museum and the Importance of the Small Museum in Morocco,” *The Ben M’sik Community Museum: Building Bridges* (Casablanca, University Hassan II Mohammed/Casablanca, 2012), 15.

ating a Facebook group page for the *Identities* project allowed us to share pictures and cheer each other on; after the American and Moroccan teams met in person, Facebook was also important in connecting individuals and has since become the venue in which we sustain our newfound friendships. All of these tools were crucial to forward movement on the project—Museums Connect program directors, in fact, recognize the importance of new media by requiring a social media plan for partner communication with each grant application.

Once we had begun discussion of our site, one of our first tasks was to collect images for the exhibit. We knew that the site would be an exploration of identity and community, and that students would capture images of their surroundings through photography. We set forth with a discussion of identity—within our groups and on the blog we considered the kinds of attributes or themes that make up one’s conception of self in both countries. As Jennifer Dickey explained, each team (Moroccan and American) came up with a list of words that describe identity, and we later merged those lists into one. Our final themes included community (of all kinds), family, religion (or faith), tradition, and education, among others, and students discovered that certain components of identity, such as faith and family, were equally important in Morocco as in the U.S. South. Students used the words as prompts for their photographs; they sought and captured representations of each theme in their communities and when traveling. The project was highly subjective, an apropos method and medium for exploring identity across cultural and political borders.

As students gathered images, we also reached out to our communities with the hope that they would inform the creation of our exhibit. After participating in a Skype workshop on community-based focus groups and surveys in the fall of 2011, the American students held a series of focus groups and informal talks within our university and, in one case, with the broader community in Cobb County. The Moroccan students simultaneously conducted surveys at their university and, later, within the neighborhood of Ben M’sik. All of our questions and conversations sought to glean perspectives about the project; on the Moroccan side, participants were asked about their opinions of the West and America, and Americans queried their informants about outstanding knowledge and perspectives on Islam and Muslim communities in metro Atlanta. The results from these efforts made it strikingly clear that (perhaps not surprisingly) our communities were ill-informed about one another’s culture. These conversations left us with a definite idea about how to shape the site (which we explicitly asked our participants to address)—we heard from our audiences that they wanted to learn about the stories and experiences of individuals, not entire categories of people. The exhibition, with the inclusion of the photographic project, oral histories, and personal reflections, was created with this community input in mind.

Though the online exhibition was our main “output” (to use language from the grant), travel is the true centerpiece of Museums Connect and often is where the bulk of grant monies are spent. We structured our project around two main trips, each that included at least five student travelers—the first

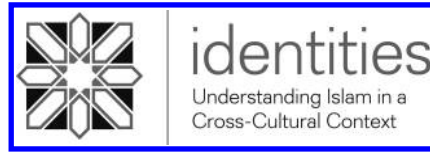


This photograph was taken in Hay Moulay Rachid, a district in Casablanca, near Ben M'sik Faculty (Hassan II University). It features a man who is wearing a "djelleba," or a traditional Moroccan robe. (Photo by Houda Karamallah)

in December 2011 to Morocco and the second in March 2012 in which American and Moroccan teams met in Washington, D.C. These trips were undoubtedly the highlight of our work together; the face-to-face interaction cemented bonds between the groups and gave the work a new meaning. The experience of a weeklong cultural immersion is not only paramount to the goals of the grant, but also provided a lasting educational component of our work.

Each trip was planned with a full agenda of cultural and historic site visits, workshops on exhibit development, and time for social interaction. In Morocco, while based in Casablanca, the American team traveled to Marrakesh and Rabat and visited students' families to share meals. Our workshops on online exhibition design and the creation of draft text took place at the BMC M, on the campus of Hassan II. In Washington, D.C., student groups traveled to the many museums on the Mall, met with museum professionals from the D.C. area, and conducted design meetings at the offices of the Alliance. In both cases, students connected during site visits, when working in groups, and when moving from place to place within the city. Formal and informal conversations about topics ranging from world politics, music, identity and representation, and exhibit design further cemented friendship and opened communication.

Our project was designed, as Jennifer Dickey notes, to impart public his-



MHHE designer Zoila Torres created the final *Identities* logo design after much deliberation by members of the U.S. and Moroccan project team. Her design drew from a graphic piece contributed by the Moroccan students and was finally decided upon by the entire group.

tory and new media skills to students. With this goal in mind, we chose Omeka as the platform for our online site.<sup>24</sup> As a flexible, open-source software, it allowed us to customize our exhibition with a little self-training by staff members and a technology intern, Matthew Scott, as well as assistance from staff at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (CHNM). Omeka, as a free tool, will be available to students as they go forth in careers as museum professionals and public historians (fields that are underfunded in both countries). Sheila Brennan, a developer at CHNM and professor at George Mason University, led a workshop for students in Washington, D.C.; the software was easy for them to manage and, in their project evaluations, popular among all who participated.

Our project experience was a positive one, and the partnership between MHHE and the BMCM is strong. But the most difficult balance in the partnerships that Museums Connect sponsor is a kind of power differential. The U.S.-based institution, for example, most often takes the lead in the application process and in the administering and reporting structure. Because the U.S. museum might also possess more resources in staff time and budget, there can be a risk of the American voice or agenda overpowering that of the partner institution. To give an example, I'd like to return to the issue of the site's logo mentioned by Jennifer Dickey. During those conversations, we were working with and trying to honor twenty different visual sensibilities. Ultimately, though Moroccan students had created their own unique graphic pieces, it was the MHHE's designer who merged our ideas into one creation. This made some participants rightly uncomfortable—how much did the logo really reflect a compromise? Though all participants agreed on the final version, were our Moroccan partners eventually silenced because of our executive decision to pass the logo to the MHHE designer? In evaluations, all student participants expressed high satisfaction with the final exhibit, but I continue to think about that small example and how our voices and workloads might have been rebalanced. The issue of power is certainly one that Museums Connect staff addresses when counseling grantees; they are careful that all perspectives are heard at every stage of the project. Nonetheless, translating that ethos into the real partnership can be elusive when resources are weighted differently.

24. [www.omeka.org](http://www.omeka.org)

The grant process requires applicants to map out potential avenues for sustainability of the partnership beyond the year in which the project is completed. For both MHHE and BMCM, sustainability was an important component of our work, and conversations about the project's continuation were present throughout the year. Travel gave opportunities to deepen these conversations; in Morocco, for example, MHHE staff met with the Dean of the Faculty of Letters, as well as other vice deans, to discuss future collaboration between Hassan II and KSU.

More immediately, the project research revealed that recent immigration and the growth of Muslim American communities in the metro Atlanta area are, with a few exceptions, understudied.<sup>25</sup> Part of our work in both grants involved collaborating with local Muslim communities to address this lack; we accomplished this purpose through oral histories, site visits, and focus groups. To continue our work I am teaching an oral history course this fall (2012) in which the class is working with Roswell Community Masjid (or mosque) in Roswell, Georgia, to save and preserve the history of the center there, which is less than five years old. Students will gain fieldwork experience interviewing RCM members to better understand patterns of immigration to Atlanta, grassroots community building (something that plays a significant part in Muslim communities in the American South), and the relationship of Muslim American communities to their non-Muslim counterparts.

Our partnership with the BMCM and Samir El Azhar will also continue. Jennifer Dickey received a "Global Initiatives" grant from KSU in which Prof. El Azhar will join us in Kennesaw in January 2013 for two weeks. During this time, he will attend and present at the Georgia Association of Museums and Galleries conference, help lead workshops on community museum work, network with Atlanta-based museum professionals, and join in the MHHE's winter programming schedule.

There are certainly critical issues to consider when applying for a Museums Connect grant and before embarking on any international partnership. In our case, the experience for all was undeniably rich. Student evaluations of the project and their reflections (included in the online exhibit) suggest that traveling, connecting with peers, and completion of the project have been transformative. Many emerged from the year intending to pursue a degree in museum studies or public history. For the professionals, too, the grant provided an opportunity for experimentation in transatlantic project management. We were fortunate to have the resources for such a project—to that end, the Museums Connect grant is an option for museums large and small who have an inclination towards international work.

25. An important exception to this is the work of Jamillah Karim. See Karim, *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender Within the Ummah* (New York: NYU Press, 2008).

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