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Revisiting the Moroccan-American Cultural Contact Zone: Gender, Mobility, and Interracial Marriage

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Abstract

This paper explores Moroccan cultural encounters with the American world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, drawing on a range of archival materials that foreground the cultural implications of early Moroccan experiences in the United States. Particular attention is paid to narratives surrounding Moorish dancers and interracial marriages, which illuminate complex processes of cultural and racial border crossings. Examining such encounters calls for a renewed, post-Saidian approach that moves beyond rigid discursive binaries to capture the Moroccan-American intersection and its impact on cultural identities and perceptions of both the 'Self' and the 'Other'. The paper also demonstrates how Moroccan mobility across the Atlantic has blurred geographical as well as cultural boundaries. It brings to the fore the act of going beyond borders and shows how this movement culminated in a significant historical moment in which two cultures from distant corners of the world converged and interacted, thereby transcending Orientalist discourse and its logic of othering. More importantly, these largely forgotten narratives of Moroccan-American interaction generate a twofold counter-discourse. First, they challenge Bernard Lewis's sweeping claim that Arab travelers allegedly lacked curiosity about Western civilization. Second, several of these accounts, particularly those centered on Moroccan women in America, subvert the long-standing Orientalist clich é of the Oriental woman as confined to the harem and incapable of transgressing her prescribed *ḥudud* (boundaries).

Keywords: contact zone, cultural encounters, border-crossings, interracial marriage, Moroccan acrobats

1. Introduction

Moroccan cross-cultural encounters with the Anglo-American world are not as recent as some may think. The act of going beyond borders and interacting with the 'other' as a cultural and political practice is steeped in Moroccan history. Early Moroccan engagements with Europe were largely conducted through ambassadors and special envoys appointed by successive Moroccan sultans to strengthen diplomatic and commercial relations from around 1600 onward. A notable example is the embassy of Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud, sent by Ahmad al-Mansur to the court of Elizabeth I to enhance trade and political ties between Morocco and England. From this period onward, Moroccan presence in Europe became increasingly visible; as noted by John Windus, "we have been pretty well accustomed to see its [Morocco's] natives in our streets" (1725). In this regard, Khalid Bekkaoui (2016) observes that Moors were frequent visitors to Britain, highlighting the sustained and dynamic nature of Moroccan-European interactions.

These missions were entirely sponsored and closely supervised by the Moroccan state. This level of oversight largely circumscribed the ambassadorial experience in Europe and confined it to formal and official settings and occasions, with only a few exceptions. As a result, Moroccan-European encounters during this period were heavily politicized, leaving little room to observe how Moroccan presence, particularly in Britain, France, and Spain, was perceived or negotiated beyond diplomatic circles. This situation, however, was not to endure. Gradually, increasing numbers of Moroccans from diverse social backgrounds–merchants, acrobats, dancers, exhibitors, and students–began to travel to Europe for commercial and educational purposes. These new arrivals significantly heightened cross-cultural interaction, rendering it more visible and difficult to overlook. Accordingly, the Moroccan presence in Europe, particularly in France, Britain, and Spain, began to be felt not only by officials but also by society as a whole. Bekkaoui (2016) notes that "Though originally small in number, Moroccan immigrants conspicuously stood out in the Manchester streets in their Oriental flowing robes, turbans, and yellow slippers".

Moreover, Moroccan mobility did not stop at Europe; Moroccans ventured even farther, sailing across the Atlantic to

the Americas. The discovery of the new world offered a new and tempting destination for both work and exploration–an opportunity too valuable to be missed by Moroccans who were renowned for their geographical curiosity. This transatlantic expansion soon brought Moroccans into direct contact with Americans, ushering in a new historical era in Moroccan-American relations. For instance, the account of Mostafa Ezzemouri, known as Estevanico or the Black Moor, documents this historical moment:

> Al-Azemmouri was an equal partner in a group of four that changed the map of the world. His journey took him up through Florida, Arizona, and New Mexico, but ended tragically around 1539. Being long held captive among Native American tribes, Estevanico learnt the Indians' languages. Given his demonstrated facility in picking up the language, he escaped and made his way back to New Mexico (Simour, 2013).

Al-Azemouri's transatlantic journey to America illustrates how the exchange between Morocco and America goes as far back as the sixteenth century. From this period onward, an increasing number of Moorish travelers made their way to the New World, either voluntarily, as with circus performers and entertainers, or involuntarily through the transatlantic slave trade. Regardless of the motives and conditions of travel, these encounters have opened up a new field of inquiry in the study of cross-cultural encounters between East and West, a dynamic in which America had previously been largely absent. Therefore, to shed light on this much-neglected historical period means rescuing "from obscurity the life experiences of transatlantic travelers whose stories are integral to our understanding of global modernity" (Simour, 2014). This also includes retrieving the voice and agency of Moroccans who lived in America, either permanently or temporarily.

Similarly, Moroccan presence in early America not only helps fill in the gaps in the history of Moroccan-American cultural encounters but also subverts the Orientalist discourse by challenging Western representations of Arabs in general, and Moroccans in particular. In the Orientalist framework, Arabs are always represented as the 'other': primitive, ahistorical, exotic, driven by emotions and incapable of governing themselves, let alone building a civilization (Said, 1978). The Orientalist discourse has deprived the Orient of its agency and the ability to produce a sophisticated culture. Edward Said argues that because Orientalism is based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident, the former has been frozen as such and rendered into a fixed image against which the latter defines itself, hence the notion of the Orient as an invention of the West (Said, 1978).

While Said's work has been seminal in exposing the power dynamics of colonial discourse and has served as a driving force in shaping the postcolonial project, it has also attracted significant criticism, particularly for its tendency to essentialize the West and overlook forms of native resistance. In this regard, Said has been charged with inscribing "the occident as a self-identical, fixed being which has always had an essence and a project, and imagination and a will," while the Orient remains confined to being "no more than its silenced object" (Clifford, 1988). Moreover, his critique of Orientalism has been seen as denying natives a meaningful role in knowledge production, foreclosing their agency, and ultimately rendering them as constructs of Western discourse (Said, 1978). Although his work remains instrumental, both theoretically and politically, in dismantling Orientalist representations, his methodological insistence on treating the West as a coherent and unchanging entity risks reproducing the very essentialist logic it seeks to challenge.

By contrast, grounding this study in Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone, defined as a space where "people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict" (1992), opens up the possibility for recognizing native resistance and agency. Such a framework not only resists Western cultural amnesia but also participates in the charting of cultural territory (Simour, 2010). Indeed, these critiques of passivity begin to unravel when attention shifts from Europe to the New World, where Moroccans have left an indelible cultural imprint on American society. In this sense, rethinking Moroccan-American cultural encounters through the lens of the contact zone enables a move beyond the Saidian model toward a more dynamic understanding of interaction, agency, and mutual transformation.

Through their visible participation in American popular culture, Moroccan entertainers disrupted the entrenched theatrical binary of 'self' and 'other', positioning themselves not as passive objects of spectacle but as active cultural agents. Their trajectories illuminate the reciprocal dynamics of transatlantic exchange, demonstrating how North African subjects both shaped and were shaped by emerging American cultural formations. This line of argument is pursued using the concept of a contact zone: "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt, 2008). The word contact, etymologically, refers to a sociolinguistic

phenomenon known as contact languages, i.e., pidgins and Creoles. The order is very significant as one leads to the other. By way of illustration, pidgin is developed among speakers of different tongues for communication, usually in the context of trade. Then, what seems like an improvisational means of communication metamorphoses into creole the moment it engenders native speakers of its own. This productive aspect of the term is highly relevant in Pratt's re-appropriation of the word. Thus, the contact zone, in Pratt's conceptualization, does not only mean the encounter between two disparate cultures, which are historically and geographically separate, but it also implies the ongoing relations and intertwined practices resulting from this co-presence, which are, given the colonial context, much informed by power relations. While Mary Louis Pratt has crafted the concept to read travel writings that emerged out of the colonial context, my use of the term will slightly differ from that of Pratt's, as I will look into the experiences of Moroccan acrobats and dancers on American soil and how they have navigated cultural differences, identifying moments of overlaps and intersections.

Accordingly, Moroccan acrobats, dancers, and slaves represent the non-canonical voices that have shaped the Moroccan experience in America, starting from the early modern period to the first half of the 20th century. Their trajectories have opened an alternative chapter in the history of Moroccan-American cultural encounters, one that resists and moves beyond Eurocentric frames of representation. This historical moment has long remained marginal within studies of East-West relations, overshadowed by a sustained scholarly preoccupation with British and French Orientalisms and by the persistent assumption, echoed in the work of scholars such as Bernard Lewis, that Arabs lacked both the intellectual curiosity and maritime agency to cross the Atlantic to the New World. Such premises have contributed to the relative scarcity of research devoted to this transatlantic juncture. Yet, thanks to research undertaken by Khalid Bekkaoui, Susan Nance, and Lhossain Simour, among others, this gap has begun to narrow. Their work revisits Moroccan presence in America through methodological approaches that resist Saidian binarism, foregrounding instead the complexity, visibility, and cultural impact of Moroccan travelers. Far from constituting a marginal or ephemeral episode, Moroccan engagement with America emerges as a sustained and influential dimension of transatlantic history.

In this sense, their experiences exemplify how the so-called 'Oriental other' negotiates identity and difference within asymmetrical structures of representation, at times strategically appropriating Western fantasies for self-fashioning and mobility. As Susan Nance observes in her foreword to Lhossain Simour's book Recol-lecting History Beyond Borders, North Africans who traveled to America were "fearless, ingenious, and cosmopolitan people" (Simour 2014, p. 1), not merely the subjects of imperial discourse but perceptive interpreters and tacticians of it. Such assessments compel a reconsideration of North African mobility as a site of agency rather than subjugation.

This paper adopts an approach informed by the archival turn in cultural studies, mobilizing the archive not as a passive repository of historical facts but also a critical site for recovering marginalized voices and reconstructing overlooked cross-cultural encounters. Focusing on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it draws primarily on newspaper articles and related archival materials to trace the presence and representation of Moroccan performers in the United States. These sources are read both along and against the grain, attentive not only to what is documented but also to silences and omissions, as well as to their implication in orientalist constructions of Moroccans, who are often depicted as lacking agency and devoid of any curiosity to travel. In so doing, the study seeks to recover fragments of agency and visibility otherwise effaced in dominant historical narratives.

2. Across the Atlantic: Moroccan Women in America

The theme of the Moorish woman trapped within the Harem, as well as the oriental garment, has been recurrent in Orientalist works across its myriad forms and genres. In her travelogue, *In Morocco* (2005), Edith Wharton depicts Fez as an Oriental space, reiterating earlier stereotypical portrayals that cast the Orient as existing outside of time. This sense of timelessness is reinforced in her Orientalist description of the harem, where she presents herself as moving across both space and time while approaching the residence of a Makhzen dignitary. She writes: "these thoughts came to me as I sat among the pale women in their mouldering prison. The descent through the steep tunnelled streets gave one the sense of being lowered into the shaft of a mine" (Wharton, 2005). For the French novelist, Gustave Flaubert (1972), such women are only valued insofar as their sensuality and erotic intensity. According to Said (1978), this act of speaking for the oriental women under the pretext that they cannot represent themselves has rendered them "creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing". Mallek Alloula also comments on the French photographers' obsession with the theme of the woman imprisoned in her own home, as well as her dress. He notes that "This dramatized equivalence between the veiling and the imprisonment is necessary for the construction of an imaginary scenario" (Alloula, 1997). The preoccupation with the harem as a policed space can also be found in Fatima Mernissi's works, especially *Dreams of Trespass* (1994), in which she outlines how the Harem, or as she also calls it, the sacred frontiers, as a male-constructed space, has made women dream about trespassing and set themselves free from these prescribed limits. For her, Moroccan women have long been held captives within the harem, an exclusively female space designed and constructed by the patriarchy. Because of this

spatial separation, women cannot overstep the boundaries of their physical and cultural domain, and every attempt to do so will only lead to "sorrow and unhappiness" (Mernissi, 1994).

However, within the framework of Moroccans beyond borders, Moroccan women's experiences in America are of paramount importance to both understanding Moroccan-American cultural exchange and deconstructing one of the long-standing clichés about Moroccan women. A close analysis of some of the travel accounts of the Moorish female dancers and acrobats in America, especially during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, will demonstrate that they had gone beyond geographical and cultural borders well before the colonial period. Their stories bear testimony to the Oriental female self-empowerment and autonomy. In addition to this, the presence of Moroccan women in America largely discredits Merinissi's argument of women's absence from the public space on one hand, and their seclusion within the physical and mental harem on the other hand. Moroccan women's venture to a land as far as America has instead opened up a new way of looking at Moroccan women, away from the reductionist Orientalist discourse.

These women traveled of their own accord and secured their livelihoods by performing before American audiences drawn from diverse social strata. Their participation in the entertainment circuits of fairs and exhibitions was not merely symbolic but economically sustaining and professionally strategic. Before addressing their substantive role within American fair culture, however, it is important to consider the question of travel without a *mahram* (male guardian). Western media representations have frequently framed the presence of a *mahram* as indicative of female dependency, construing it as evidence that Muslim women lack agency and require constant male supervision. Such readings, however, flatten complex social practices into reductive stereotypes. Although the transatlantic mobility of these women may appear revolutionary when measured against prevailing nineteenth-century gender norms, for many of them, travel was a pragmatic and normalized aspect of professional life. Their journeys were neither anomalous nor purely transgressive; rather, they formed part of established circuits of performance and exchange.

In this respect, Moorish women exercised discernible autonomy, making contractual, economic, and personal decisions independently, thereby challenging dominant narratives that cast them as passive subjects in need of patronage. This is the case of the four Moorish dancers who wanted to stay in America in 1904. They openly voiced out their plea to the magistrate to permit them to stay in St. Louis, " 'Me want to stay in Sent Louee and work,' Said Gentilla yesterday, and her desire was echoed by Rachel, Lucie, and Sola, all of whom wish to remain here" (Bekkaoui, 2020). Miss Tisha Hadjali, a Moorish acrobat, is another example of traveling Oriental females who obliterate all kinds of barriers, be they geographical or cultural. Thanks to some archival snippets, we learn that Miss Tisha died in Brooklyn, a place the article refers to as her home. More importantly, Miss Tisha travelled and performed on three different continents: Asia, Europe, and America. Such a brave act of constant border-crossing is not just a show of the Moorish female mobility, but it is rather a clear proof of her ability to live and actively negotiate her transnational identity.

Moorish women's border-crossings should be understood not merely as acts of geographical displacement but as complex cultural mediations, enacted and amplified through highly visual Oriental performances. Their mobility entailed a shift in representational space, as they carried North African artistic forms, most notably acrobatics and dance, into the heart of the American entertainment industry. In doing so, they inscribed elements of Maghrebi culture onto the stages of Western fairs, theatres, and popular spectacles. Female dancers in particular occupied a central position within this transatlantic encounter. Performers such as Torquia, Fadma, Rosina, Messouada, Zahar Ben Tahar, Zahra Kader, and Fatima Wazzan exemplify the Moorish women who captivated American audiences with stylized renditions of Oriental dance. Their performances did not emerge in a cultural vacuum; rather, they engaged an American imaginary already shaped by travel writings and Orientalist visual culture. "Those North African entertainers who had already been performing in Wild West shows discovered that exoticism sold; they went on to dominate the world of Oriental entertainment on stages in the United States and Europe" (Jacobs, 2014). By drawing upon– and subtly reworking–these preexisting fantasies of the Oriental woman, Moorish dancers offered spectators what appeared to be an authentic, embodied encounter with the long-imagined female 'other'. As a result, this mix of oriental dance with Moorish customs started to blur the line between pure circus performance and pseudo-ethnographic content.

However, these performances should not be reduced to acts of self-Orientalization and self-exoticization. Rather, these performers strategically navigated Orientalist expectations, at times appropriating and reframing tropes associated with the oriental female subject. In staging an Orientalized femininity as spectacle, they not only catered to but also destabilized Western desires, transforming processes of exoticization into sites of economic and performative leverage. Thanks to the narratives in amusement magazines and newspaper archives, the Moroccan female performer's body is revisited and represented as a signifier of transnational mobility and a prototype of freedom and independence. This body, in effect, serves as a site of cultural exchange and a 'de-othering' mechanism in the East/ West historical encounter.

These performances, which took place in different American venues, led to a growing fad characterized by a hunger

among Americans for knowledge of the Middle East and North Africa (Jacobs, 2014). This explains the growing number of Moorish performances in American popular entertainment fairs and theatres:

> The last decades of the 19th century and the first of the 20th, however, witnessed a huge number of Muslim North African Arab women—Moroccans, Algerians, and Egyptians—in American popular entertainment. These "living exhibits" included belly dancers, ballet performers, circus dancers, wire gymnasts, and many more. Two international expositions were held in Philadelphia (1876 and 1926), one in Chicago (1893), and one in St. Louis (1904). These were often animated with indigenous people from various countries, including Morocco...Performances greatly stimulated the growing interest in the 'Orient' for they offered quick and seemingly realistic impressions of the societies and cultures they purported to represent (Simour 2011, p. 137).

Significantly, these performances created alternative avenues through which American audiences could engage with North African culture beyond the exaggerations and distortions characteristic of several orientalist travel writings. By undertaking transatlantic journeys and staging embodied displays of dance and performance, Moorish women offered spectators a mediated yet immediate encounter with forms of "Oriental" expression that unsettled inherited textual stereotypes. Rather than appearing as silent objects of description, they emerged as visible cultural producers who shaped the terms of their own display.

In the American context, these women were not merely exotic curiosities but professional artists, transcontinental travelers, and autonomous agents. A newspaper article in *Kawkab America* draws attention to oriental belly dance not merely as a sexualized performance, but rather as an artistic form that requires great skill and aesthetic sophistication:

> Her 'Danse Du Ventre,' as the name implies, consisted in the measured movements of the stomach, shoulders, and loins in accompaniment with the music, with hardly any noticeable movements of the feet. The body swayed gently to and fro, the eyes changed their expressions with al-most each movement, the dancer advanced in measured steps while various parts of her body were kept in shivering-like motions independent from each other. She held two handkerchiefs that she used to emphasize the harmonious and undulating movements of her body (Ar-beely, 1893).

The above description pushes 'Danse Du Ventre' beyond erotic sensation to tap into its artistic aspects. Moreover, belly dancing began to be appropriated by American women; "American women began to coopt belly dancing; if one digs beneath the exotic costumes and the Oriental names, one often finds an American" (Jacobs, 2014). This reflects the cultural interplay between Morocco and America during this period, when Moroccan artistic expressions and customs were appropriated by American women.

Furthermore, the Moorish woman is narrated not as a psychological foil to the white Western woman but as her equal with the same set of skills and mental capacities. She is adventurous, graceful, skillful, independent, and pragmatic. Princess Torquia of Morocco is a case in point; she embodies practically all the aforementioned qualities. In July 1902, the *American Union* ran her story under the headline, "Princess of Morocco: Eastern Society is Pleased with Visit of Oriental Beauty whose Dancing is Exquisite":

> For several weeks, the most exclusive set in the Back Bay has been entertaining and has been entertained by a youthful princess of Tangier, Mlle Torquia of Morocco … She is not yet 24 years of age and is a perfect type of Oriental beauty… She speaks English, Spanish, Italian, French, Russian, Swedish, Algerian, Danish and several dialects of the desert, such as Skallah. She sings and dances not with the hopping motion of the limbs familiar to Europeans but with a wondrously swaying of the arms, feet, and legs. It is a dance that tells the story with the clearest pantomime. It features love and hate and ambition and despair. It gives majestic historical pictures.

The reception of the princess of Tangier on the American stage has unsettled discursive narratives on the Oriental female. Torquia has impressed the American audience not only with her performance but also with a range of theatrical and linguistic skills. She is a dancer, a pantomimist, and a multilingual storyteller whose narratives evoke historical scenes with a Shakespearean sensibility.

Equally noteworthy, archival records frequently depict Moorish women as pragmatic and discerning actors. Contrary to

certain Western and Moroccan feminist assumptions, these women often demonstrated awareness of their rights and responsibilities, negotiating social and professional spaces with considerable agency. For instance, Massuda, a whirling dervish, takes her employer Hassan Ben Ali to court over a sum of money (Bekkaoui, 2020). According to the archive, Massuda not only sues Hassan, but she also defends her case with convincing arguments. Eventually, she wins, and the court settles the whole matter for her by demanding that she get 260 dollars. Indeed, this account goes beyond the simplistic understanding of the trial as a legal disagreement between an employer and his employee, but rather as a counter-discourse to the prevalent prejudices about the female Orient and her subservient nature. In reality, Massuda stands out as an epitome of the learned and sensible Oriental woman who knows what to do if her employer is not meeting their responsibilities.

Another notable example of the Moorish Woman as a cultured and erudite traveler is found in the archival text of Zahra's impression of New York, 1894. The latter is of paramount importance in refuting the homogenizing assumption of Moroccan women's confinement to the harem. Zahra displays a great sense of curiosity towards American culture. "She has seen all of the United States except Texas, California, and New Mexico. Covering 45 states in her one year with the circus is not such a bad record" (Bekkaoui, 2020). She is fascinated by how schools, theaters, and newspapers are made. As such, she takes up the role of an explorer whose ventures upset the long-held clishés about Moroccan women. Zahra's experience exposes: "the degree to which Morocco has always been a transnational nation and how cultural power and agency—with self and other reversed—actually functioned" (Simour, 2014, p.1).

3. Beyond Self and Other Binaries: Interracial Marriage

Interracial marriage between Moroccan male acrobats and American women represents a significant historical moment in which the boundary between Self and Other becomes fluid and ambiguous. The Moroccan-American cultural encounter extended beyond fairs and performances, encompassing these intimate and highly visible acts of social entanglement that both solidified and made the Moroccan presence in America publicly recognizable. Wedding ceremonies and their coverage in amusement magazines and newspapers highlight how personal, ethnic, national, and cultural boundaries were negotiated at a time when distinctions between Self and Other were otherwise sharply drawn. As cultural acts, these marriages challenged enduring Orientalist assumptions that cast the East as a subordinate or ontological counterpart to the West. Rudyard Kipling's assertion in The Ballad of East and West: "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet; Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat" illustrates the ideological backdrop against which such unions were perceived: the sanctification of Western supremacy as divinely ordained and the suggestion that any merging of East and West constituted a transgression. In this context, Moroccan-American interracial marriages emerge not merely as personal or social phenomena but as acts that subtly subvert the hierarchical and essentialist logics of Orientalist discourse.

A quick glance at how the Moors are depicted in Renaissance plays will suffice to produce Western recognition of the Moorish people and their God-given inferiority to white men. Therefore, Kipling's ballad is but a perpetuation of a common Western feeling towards the dark-skinned, whose way of life represents the exact opposite of Europe. Having said this, any kind of union that may be developed between the two is doomed from the very beginning due to their contradictory nature. By way of illustration, in British drama, the coupling between black men and white European women, Othello is a case in point, is always staged in a way that portrays black men as transgressors and violators who seduce these women into having sexual affairs with them, as the following quote showcases:

> In unions between black men and white women in English Renaissance literature, the desire black Africans were shown to feel towards white European women usually ended in disaster, because these relationships seem to be more about lust of power than about sexuality. Black African characters are portrayed as engaging in illicit relationships, often with socially superior women, in order to climb up the social ladder… black desire for power is often accompanied by an internalized realization of marginality and black inferiority (Foster & Lowe, 2005).

This comes as no surprise, for in Western imagination, blackness is believed to be an explicit site of foulness. Because of their ambition and sense of inferiority, black people are no plausible match for white women. Thus, any alleged union between them, even marriage, is practically inconceivable.

Western assumptions that Moors were unsuitable for marriage with white women begin to lose their credibility when we examine narratives of Moroccan-American interactions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These evolving attitudes underscore the enduring visibility of the Moroccan presence in America, as many contemporary families trace their origins to interracial unions between Moroccan travelers and American residents. One illustrative example is the

romance between Hadj Mouly Ali Semlali—known as Prince Muly in American amusement parks during the 1890sand Ingrid, a naturalized German actress. Their relationship transcended both cultural and racial boundaries, offering a vivid historical instance in which human connection prevailed over rigid notions of race and ethnicity, creating a more nuanced and colorful understanding of Moroccan-American encounters.

In an article entitled "The sexually Enthralling Other: Oriental Weddings in Performance and American Erotics of the Brown Threat," Simour retells this story as he has retrieved it from an unpublished autobiographical project written by one of Mouly Ali Semlali's daughters.

> Mly Ali landed in America at such an early age and was the youngest of a troupe of gymnasts who toured the country performing in tent shows for many years. Ingrid was four years older than him when they first met. They were deeply in love, as the autobiography confirms, but Mly Ali had to endure his compatriots' envious rumours that had been circulating in circus wagons (Simour, 2012).

Unfortunately, the story is not thoroughly documented, leaving us just with speculations and many unanswered questions. Another intriguing story of interracial marriage between a Moroccan acrobat and an American woman is found in *The San Francisco Call*:

> Mrs. Julia Gale, the wife of Charles Gale, suddenly eloped and deserted her husband. Her puzzling disappearance had 'a bit of romance,' and her husband did not believe there was another man involved in the mysterious case. Mrs. Gale was Irish, and her maiden name was Julia Doyle. She came to New York to join her sister, Josie Williams, who was an actress. Josie was managing a 'boarding house for theatrical people,' and it was through her that the Moroccan acrobat, Hadj Tahar, met Julia, got married and travelled together for various show acts (Bekkaoui, 2020).

Although the marriage was short-lived, it resulted in the birth of a child of both Moroccan and American heritage. This child stands as a tangible marker of the cultural and racial intersections that characterized Moroccan-American encounters, complicating Western preconceptions about the supposed dividing line between the East and West. The union thus acquires significance beyond its duration, gesturing toward forms of intimacy and affiliation that unsettled rigid racial and ethnic boundaries.

In contrast to Simour's reading of the romance between Hadj Tahar and Julia, this episode may be understood less as a site of anxiety or domination and more as a moment, however brief, of multicultural negotiation and cross-cultural accommodation. Interpreting Moroccan-American intimate relations primarily through an "Othello syndrome" framework risks reinscribing the encounter within an Orientalist matrix structured by suspicion, jealousy, and racialized otherness. Such a lens may overdetermine the narrative, attributing to it symbolic burdens that exceed its historical contours. While critical vigilance remains necessary, the broader significance of these unions as instances of interracial interaction and social entanglements between Morocco and America deserves recognition in its own right, rather than being subordinated to the imperatives of a single interpretive paradigm.

4. Conclusion

The archival narratives discussed above provide compelling evidence of how Moroccan presence in America created complex spaces in which the boundaries between the American self and the cultural Other were fluid and negotiable. These cultural and geographical border-crossings have unsettled long-held discursive constructions of the Orient in general and Morocco in particular, as a foil to the West. The Moroccan-American encounter thus emerges as a moment in which racial hierarchies and binary distinctions were challenged through mutual curiosity and myriad cultural performances. Similarly, engaging with these archival materials invites a reconsideration of the notion of the silenced Oriental other famously articulated by Edward Said, who largely denied native agency. These historical records serve as concrete evidence of transatlantic cultural exchange and illuminate how Moroccan experiences contributed to the shaping of the New World as a cosmopolitan space where multiple racial and cultural encounters occurred. The experiences of Moroccan performers, and women in particular offer an alternative counter-discourse to assumptions of Arabs' supposed indifference to other cultures and to claims of women's seclusion within the harem. By documenting agency, cultural curiosity, and female autonomy, these texts destabilize and challenge the authority of entrenched Orientalist and Eurocentric narratives, revealing a more nuanced and dynamic history of Moroccan-American engagement.

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