

Traveling in Morocco from Front to Back Spaces as a Way to Deflect the Tourist Gaze

Patrick Saveau
Franklin University Switzerland

ABSTRACT

What happens when a travel leader decides to distance himself and the group of students he is leading from front regions to embrace back regions, namely spaces that are not promoted by the tourist industry? In other words, what happens when a travel leader tries to deflect the “tourist gaze” (Urry)? Is it a search for an ever evanescent notion of authenticity? In addition, what can this investigation of “deviance” from the normalized tourist tours reveal about the students’ ability to embrace different social practices and question their own? These are the main questions this essay aims at answering.

KEY WORDS

Tourist Gaze, Front and Back Regions, Authenticity, Simulacra, Gnawa Sufi Brotherhood Performance, Experiential Learning, Culture of Safetyism

When someone mentions Morocco as a tourist destination, several cities, monuments, cultural artifacts, culinary traditions and images cross our minds. Obviously, depending on one's country of origin and one's knowledge about Morocco, these images may be different from one individual to the next. However, there seem to be unchanging characteristics that tend to be heard when depicting this country. Among them, the four imperial cities (Rabat, Fes, Meknes, Marrakech) that must be visited, Moroccan cuisine with its couscous and tagine, arts and crafts, with its carpet weavers, pottery makers, and tanneries, and finally Morocco's spectacular scenery, with the Sahara Desert, the Atlas Mountains, and its 3500 kilometers of coastline. These unchanging characteristics are subject to what John Urry and Jonas Larsen have defined in their eponymous book as "the tourist gaze." In other words, they correspond to what tourists have been trained to experience when they visit Morocco: "the concept of the gaze highlights that looking is a learned ability" in the sense that there is nothing natural in the way tourists look at these cities, eat these dishes, and shop for these items. As a matter of fact, when people visit a tourist destination, they gaze at it "through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires, and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education" (Urry and Larsen 2011, 1, 2).

When I embarked on my first Academic Travel to Morocco in 2005, I did not have any expectations, just the desire to discover a new place. The Dean at the time had asked me to step in and replace a travel leader who was scheduled to lead the Academic Travel to Morocco. No personal experiences or memories would condition my gaze as I had never been there before, just texts I would have my students read in preparation for the travel whose focus was the role played by music in defining Moroccan culture. As soon as I arrived in Casablanca, I understood that the official guide who was to accompany us throughout the Academic Travel would direct my gaze and tell my students and I what was worth looking at.¹ For instance, in Marrakech, we went to "Chez Ali Marrakech." A quick look at Chez Ali's webpage states: "Depuis presque 40 ans, le Restaurant Chez Ali propose à ses hôtes un spectacle folklorique mêlant chants et danses traditionnelles, fantasia et voltige équestre. Dans un décor digne des contes des mille et une nuits, vous serez envoûté par le folklore marocain légendaire, vous mangerez, écouterez et assisterez à un divertissement reconstituant les célébrations ancestrales berbères" (For almost 40 years, Restaurant Chez Ali has been offering their guests a folkloric show with traditional singing and dancing, fantasia, and equestrian acrobatics. In a setting worthy of the *One Thousand and One Nights* tales, you will be spellbound by the legendary Moroccan folklore while eating, listening, and attending a show that recreates the Berber ancestral celebration).² This particular show corresponded to what Daniel J. Boorstin (1964) has named "pseudo-events", which stand in stark contrast with reality. As explained by John Urry and Jonas Larsen, "Isolated from the host environment and the local people, mass tourists travel in guided groups and find pleasure in inauthentic contrived attractions, gullibly enjoying 'pseudo-events' and disregarding the 'real' world outside" (2011, 7-8). One of the events offered at Chez Ali is the *fantasia*, a traditional horsemanship show that, as it is being re-presented, has nothing to do with this particular social practice. Indeed, *fantasias* usually take place to celebrate a wedding, a birth, but in particular a saint during cultural and religious festivals known as *moussem*.³ The religious dimension of a *fantasia* is being ignored at Chez Ali, further plunging the gazer into an event that smacks of Orientalism.⁴

Boorstin's denunciation of "pseudo-events" was part of a discussion he had titled "the lost art of travel", but most of all part of a reflection around the concept of authenticity. As Heitmann states, "it can be argued that authenticity has become such a flexible and changing concept that its

¹ I would like to state clearly here that this is not specific to Morocco.

² For more information about Chez Ali, see their website at <https://chezalimarrakech.com/>. The reader will note that Chez Ali, before being a place for cultural events, is first and foremost a restaurant.

³ A *moussem* is a regional festival that combines a religious celebration honoring a saint on the one hand and festivities and commercial activities on the other.

⁴ Among the many artists examined by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, Eugène Delacroix holds a prominent place. See for example the painting entitled *Fantasia Arabe*, dated 1833.

entire existence is in question” (2011, 57). I would like nonetheless to go over the main arguments about this concept to demonstrate where Academic Travel at Franklin University Switzerland may stand in terms of authenticity. A quick way to discard the idea of authenticity is to think that we live in a globalized and consumerist world where objects, souvenirs, intangible products such as performances are commodified, reduced to goods whose value boils down to an exchange value. Tourists buy souvenirs, attend and performances in exchange for money. Referring back to the *fantasia* at Chez Ali I mentioned in the previous paragraph, this performance was robbed of its original meaning, unbeknown to most tourists.

Since Boorstin (1964), the concept of authenticity has come to be theorized in different ways. As far as he was concerned, tourists were to be opposed to travelers. The former were passive, traveled “in guided groups, thrive[d] on contrived attractions and [were] isolated from the locals and host environment” (Heitmann 2011, 47). The latter were “active and exploring” (2011, 47). Could this distinction apply to Franklin University students? In order to answer this question, Erving Goffman’s structural division of social establishments into front and back regions turns out to be quite helpful. Dean MacCannell borrowed this conceptualization of space, but went further than this front/back binary approach. He found that “in tourist settings, between the front and the back there is a series of special spaces designed to accommodate tourists and to support their beliefs in the authenticity of their experiences” (MacCannell 1973, 589). He then came up with a series of different stages that explain how tourists, through the different activities they experience, can move from a front region to a back region in search of authenticity. The closer to a back space tourists get, the closer they may experience authenticity. However, the last and sixth stage of this continuum is “rarely – if ever – reached” (Heitmann 2011, 49). Tourists are then bound to experience one of the previous five stages that are part of what MacCannell (1973) calls “staged authenticity”.

The staged authenticity of the events my students and I were exposed to during my first travel to Morocco definitely belonged to “spaces manipulated and managed to accommodate tourists” (Heitmann 2011, 49), in other words to front regions/spaces/stages. Entitled “Listening to Morocco: Music between Tradition and Modernity”, the Academic Travel aimed at developing “an appreciation of Morocco’s cultural heritage through its music.”⁵ Two concerts during this trip were scheduled, one with the “Conservatoire de Musique” of Fes for an Arab-Andalusian music performance,⁶ the other, a Sufi music concert with the Aissawa brotherhood, a religious Islamic mystical order.⁷ As I was calling Mohamed Briouel, the director and conductor of the Arab-Andalusian music Orchestra to finalize the organization of our concert, my guide approached me and asked me what the conditions of this performance were. He was concerned with two aspects: would we have dinner, which later reminded me of what was to happen at Chez Ali, and how much did it cost? This all may sound anecdotal to the reader, but I must unfold the thread of this whole event in order to show how the tourist industry operates and the reasons that pushed me later to find cultural activities that would deflect the tourist gaze. When I told my guide that we would not be served dinner and announced the price of the performance, he threw his arms up in the air and told me it was much too expensive and that he could find the exact same performance with dinner for much less. Our guide was inscribing himself in a postmodern society where “consumption [...] becomes the dominant driver [...] and tourism [...] becomes a commodity to be consumed” (Heitmann 2011, 52).⁸

⁵ The desire to deflect the gaze came after this very first Academic Travel to Morocco.

⁶ Arab-Andalusian music is the official music of Morocco. The Arab-Andalusian music orchestra is presently directed by Mohamed Briouel (my interlocutor since 2005), disciple of Haj Abdelkrim Rais, the founder of this orchestra in 1946.

⁷ After this first experience, I decided to reshape this Academic Travel and Franklin University Switzerland students have now the opportunity to see up to seven concerts in eleven days.

⁸ For instance, in Fes, in lieu of a cultural visit that could have included a stop at the University of al-Qarawiyyin, the oldest university in the world, our guide took us to the tanneries, the carpet weavers and

I therefore called Mohamed Briouel and cancelled on him, to my great shame retrospectively speaking. Indeed, once in Fes, we were taken to a place where I immediately noticed an abundance of French tourists which meant that the social relationships between hosts and guests were determined according to precise standards. We were occupying a front stage, in other words a tourist bubble where visitors “not only expect western standards of accommodation and food, but also bilingual staff and well-orchestrated arrangements” (Urry and Larsen 2011, 62). In lieu of an Arab-Andalusian music orchestra, we had two violinists and a player of *darbouka* sitting on a small stage and facing mostly indifferent tourists. Where were the *kanoun*, the *oud*, the *rabab*, musical instruments that characterize Arab-Andalusian music?⁹ I felt cheated, all the more so when the guide handed me the bill at the end of the “show”, as it was not significantly lower than what I would have paid for the real performance. The next day, I called the restaurant and listed all the different components of the event, including the menu. I almost fell from my chair when I was told the real price of the tourist event we had attended the night before. When I went downstairs to get on the bus, our guide was waiting for me at the reception, asking me to pay the restaurant bill. I flatly told him I would only pay the price he really paid at the restaurant.

This pseudo-event was the triggering episode that led me to decide I would never rely on a guide again in an attempt to deflect the tourist gaze. Instead of reducing my students’ experience to a visual one, I would try my utmost to focus as much as I could on “other senses and bodily experiences” (Urry and Larsen 2011, 14).¹⁰ Among the Sufi performances (Gnawa; Aissawa; H’madcha) my students have been attending since I reshaped my course in 2007,¹¹ I would like to focus on Gnawa music with *maâlem* (master) Abdenbi El Meknassi and outline the main components of a Gnawa performance in order to demonstrate how it deflects the tourist gaze. Born in 1960 in Meknes, Abdenbi El Fakir, known as El Meknassi in reference to his town of origin, is a professional musician who not only performs the traditional Gnawa repertoire with his group, but also more contemporary styles of Gnawa music, in Morocco and abroad.¹²

I met Abdenbi El Meknassi in 2008 as I was scouting for activities to do on my Academic Travel. After I explained to him its focus, he offered to open his home to my groups each time I traveled to Morocco in the future. This implied that we would enter into a private space that is off limits to tourists, and it would allow us to distance ourselves from a front region whose main purpose is to accommodate tourists. In other words, attending a *lila*,¹³ the highly ritualized Gnawa ceremony, in a private home meant we would not be “isolated from the host environment and the local people” (Urry and Larsen 2011, 7).

As a Gnawa, Abdenbi El Meknassi has always played music in a sacred as well as in a secular context. Within the sacred context, a ceremony is organized for people (mostly women) who need to be at peace with the spirits that inhabit them and for locals who want to listen to Gnawa music and provide support to the women who will trance-dance (Kapchan 2007, 2-3). In

the pottery-making shops, hoping my students would be in a consumption mode which would allow him to get a commission by the same token.

⁹ A *darbouka* is a type of drum made of clay covered with goat skin. A *kanoun* is a thin, flat, and trapeze-like string instrument that rests on the instrumentalist’s lap while he plays. An *oud* is a string instrument that resembles a lute. A *rabab* is a bowed string instrument.

¹⁰ The notion of the tourist gaze has been critiqued for reducing the tourist experience to sightseeing (Urry and Larsen 2011, 14). See for instance Harvey C. Perkins and David C. Thorns’ “Gazing or Performing?: Reflections on Urry’s Tourist Gaze in the Context of Contemporary Experience in the Antipodes” and Nigel Thrift’s *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. In the latest edition of their book, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, Urry and Larsen rethink “the concept of the tourist gaze as performative, embodied practices” (2011, 14).

¹¹ Since my first experience in Morocco in 2005, I have led this Academic Travel every two years, except in 2021 due to COVID restrictions.

¹² In 2018, for instance, he performed during the *Festival Gnaoua Musiques du Monde*, a festival celebrating the Gnawa culture that has been taking place in Essaouira on a yearly basis since 1998.

¹³ *Lila* means night in Moroccan Arabic.

her own ethnographic study of such a ceremony, Zineb Majdouli explains that the possessed person for whom the ceremony was organized had staunchly refused “d’avoir une présence non musulmane dans sa cérémonie” as such a person could “attirer le courroux des esprits” (to have a non-Muslim presence attending her ceremony, as such a person could attract the wrath of the spirits; 2007, 37).¹⁴ Abdenbi El Mekkassi dismisses this division between a *lila* and a performance done for non-Muslim and foreign audiences. All *lila* are sacred for him, no matter if some members of the audience are non-Muslims.



Figure 1: Abdenbi El Mekkassi playing his *guembri* (March 2009)

Another important aspect to consider when trying to deflect the tourist gaze is the relation to time. Tourism, despite being a leisure activity, can be highly structured and program-dependent, as it is the case with Franklin University’s Academic Travel program. Professors need to provide students with a schedule. Attending a *lila* entails that there cannot be a schedule. Time is not clock time any longer, it is spiritual time that knows no limits. We usually arrive around 8:00pm and then hardly anything happens for some time, but for the tea and pastries that are prepared for all the participants, symbolic of hospitality in any Moroccan home. Students look at each other, talk to each other but I can usually sense some of them being in a state of frustration. Then begins the first part of the *lila*, the *âada*, a procession that is going to take the participants from the public to

¹⁴ Gnawa music is devotional music, “it is sacred music by dint of its words, which praise and solicit blessing from God, the prophet, particular Islamic saints, as well as a pantheon of both sub-Saharan and North African, Islamic and non-Islamic spirits. The music is considered so powerful that at one time it was thought that singing the songs outside of the ceremonial context would incite the wrath of the spirits, who would then exact retribution in the form of afflicting the transgressor” (Kapchan 2007, 22).

the private spheres. We all get up and proceed into the street, following Abdenbi El Meknassi and his musicians. According to Zineb Majdouli, “il s’agit d’un moment liminal marqué par l’attente du moment sacré: on annonce et prépare ce moment mais sans y être encore. Même dans une ambiance conviviale, les convives sont dans l’appréhension de ce qui va suivre” (it is a liminal moment characterized by the expectation of the sacred: this moment is announced and prepared but not quite there yet. Even in this friendly atmosphere, the guests feel apprehensive about what is to take place; 2007, 41).¹⁵ As we begin to occupy the public space, locals start gathering on both sides of the street to look at the procession even if they know exactly what is about to take place. All of a sudden, Franklin University students are not gazers any longer, as they become the object of the gaze. Accordingly, we are not occupying a front space and as we proceed slowly back into the home, we get closer to a back space. The sound of the *tbel* itself, a big drum slung around the player’s torso and played with carved sticks by Abdenbi El Meknassi and another musician, along with the clacking of the *grageb* (iron castanets) are so deafening that the front space seems to dissolve itself and lose its pertinence.



Figure 2: Abdendi El Meknassi and his son playing the *tbel* during the *âada* (March 2022)

¹⁵ In her description of the *âada*, Deborah Kapchan states that “a brass tray laden with ceramic bowls filled with different kinds of incense – black and white benzoin, myrrh, sandalwood, chips of amber, and musk – each scent intended for a different spirit or *jinn*” is carried over to the street by “the woman overseer of the ceremony, the *mqaddema*” (2007, 11). A bowl of milk and another one filled with dates, as well as candles carried by all participants are also a part of the ritual.

Once inside comes the *kouyou*, a musical part between the *âada* and the invocation of the *mluk* (the owners, the possessors of the possessed). Some of the musicians, but for the *mâalem*, start dancing in the *rebba*, an area that faces the master and later on will be reserved for the trance-dancers. Some of the dance moves can be very acrobatic while others remind the audience of the enslaved condition of the Gnawa.¹⁶ During the *âada* and the *kouyou*, I can feel the tension slowly building among my students. The discrepancy between theory (the texts I have them read during our pre-academic travel meetings) and practice could not be more overt.

Franklin University students first attended a Gnawa performance in 2009. WhatsApp was created this very same year, YouTube was only four years old, neither Instagram nor Snapchat nor Tiktok were in existence.¹⁷ At the time, students were not “constantly subjected to images and messages from television, the internet and other media channels” (Heitmann 2011, 52). Since I started organizing Sufi performances for my students, I have not so much relied on visuals as on texts. This entails that students do not have a clear image in their head of how the performance is going to unfold. They know the different components of a Gnawa performance, they have read about it, but I refrain from showing them images or videos found on the net as they do not necessarily represent what they are about to experience. Indeed, such ceremonies situated in back regions, in other words “spaces where private, everyday lives of the locals are given priority” (Heitmann 2011, 49), do not exist on the net and would not make sense. In sum, students who have traveled with me and continue to do so do not have a preconceived idea of what they will see.

After the *âada* and the *kouyou*, the students have the opportunity to relax, when around 10:00pm., sometimes later, several chickens are put on different tables in front of them; they exchange puzzled looks when they realize there is no cutlery and I tell them they will have to eat with their fingers. Some of them need a few minutes to adjust to this new way of eating, but as they watch their peers digging in, they join in, and I can see them enjoying their dinner, reveling in the moment they are sharing together. We again have tea, and after the tables have been cleared and cleaned, the main part of the *lila* can start.

The invocation of the *mluk* is supposed to take us until dawn. As the years go by, I have noticed that the students’ endurance level to the intensity of the ritual ceremony has subsided. When I first started working with Abdenbi El Meknassi, we would leave around 5:00am. These days, around 1:00am, I need to signal to him that the students have had enough. The fast frenetic clacking of the *qraqeb*, the invocations of the *mâalem* which the other musicians respond to in unison according to a tight script, and the unfamiliar sounds of the *guembri* may sound the same after a while.¹⁸ In order to appreciate Gnawa music, one needs to listen with one’s heart. As stated by Deborah Kapchan, “in order for [perception] to be a pleasure, an inward sense is required; beyond audition, this sense is not found in the ear [...], but in the heart” (2007, 43).¹⁹ I would add that in order for a non-Muslim and a Westerner to let oneself get carried away by Gnawa, one needs to close one’s eyes, block everything that is around so that the music becomes an embodied experience. Instead of being a sort of repetitive type of music, the listener is engulfed in

¹⁶ John Wright notes that “Morocco was probably the largest single market for imported black slaves in the Arab Maghreb” (2002, 55). Slavery in Morocco started in the eight century and ended in the early twentieth century. During the *kouyou*, the dancers make little steps as if their feet were in chains.

¹⁷ YouTube was created in 2005, WhatsApp in 2009, Instagram in 2010, Snapchat in 2011, and TikTok in 2016.

¹⁸ The best secular analogy I could make when I reflect upon the Gnawa ritual would be to imagine ravers dancing all night next to loudspeakers until they collapse with fatigue.

¹⁹ Kapchan’s source here is Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (c. 1058-1111), the Persian philosopher, theologian, and mystic, who in his book *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* dedicated a chapter to music and how to properly listen to it entitled “Responses Proper to Listening to Music and the Experience of Ecstasy.” To access this chapter, visit the site of the Islamic Texts Society at <https://its.org.uk/catalogue/al-ghazali-on-responses-proper-to-listening-to-music-and-the-experience-of-ecstasy/>

soundscapes, mindscapes, and landscapes that differ from what one is used to. To each *mlek*²⁰ corresponds a color, an incense, a rhythm, and a trance. There are seven colors: white, black, blue, red, green, yellow, and brown. I would presently like to go over several events that happened while invoking the *mluk* whose colors are blue, red, and black, and how students reacted to them.

The invocation of the spirit of Sidi Musa (the spirit of the sea), whose color is blue, usually earns the approval of the students. As a matter of fact, it exudes peacefulness and I have never seen anyone getting into a trance when this spirit is invoked. Instead, one of the *qraqeb* musicians gets up, places a bowl of water on his head and starts dancing to the rhythm of the music as if he were diving into and swimming in the sea.

The spirit of Sidi Hamu, the spirit of the slaughter house, whose color is red, can provoke feelings of discomfort and anxiety. Indeed, it demands blood. Some trance-dancers can use knives and scarify themselves, something my students and I have never seen. However, the students have witnessed the sacrifice of an animal, usually a rooster. When the invocation starts, a *qraqeb* musician picks it up, places it upon his head, soothes it, and eventually puts it on the floor in the *rehba* so that it lies quietly on its back, facing Mecca. The music is loud, the participants are all around the dance area, next to one another, but for those who do not want to watch what they consider a “barbarous” act.²¹ The rooster does not make a sound, it seems to be sleeping. Then the musician in charge of the sacrifice makes a small incision in its neck, allowing the blood to drip in a bowl that he will drink from. In 2017, the invocation of the spirit of Sidi Hamu did not sit well with some students. One of them, Samuel Miller,²² answering the following prompt – “The Other, the idea of Otherness enables us to understand, discover, know about ourselves and our own culture. In which ways has the trip to Morocco acted as a revealer of your own self, your own cultural identity with its codes, values, and norms?” – wrote:

Having been raised religious, and having spent a year as a novice in a secluded monastery after high school, I am very comfortable with the spiritual world. Going into the Gnawa performance, I had some small trepidation at being part of another religious ceremony, but decided to try to be a disinterested observer. After the chicken was killed however, everything changed. I could feel a dark presence in the room, a presence that was not friendly. It felt cold and *dangerous* (my emphasis), particularly as the music increased and the trances became more violent. Looking around at our group, I saw that Fadi, the other devoutly religious person of our group, was huddled in the back muttering prayers to himself.²³ I did the same.

Another student, Christine Snitkjaer wrote:

The Gnawa musical performance was the experience that “challenged” me the most in relation to otherness. When I started to cry in response to the music and trance-dancing, I could not believe I was actually doing it. [...]. I did not want to seem overly sensitive. At the same time, a part of me simply did not care what others were thinking. Something about the performance loosened me up to being present in the moment. It seemed as if that room was “everything” and the rest of the world did not exist. I could not “control” how I felt, no matter how badly I wished to. Initially, I wanted to say that my reaction was because the Gnawa performance

²⁰ *Mlek* is the singular of *mluk*.

²¹ This adjective smacks of colonial semantics.

²² All the students mentioned in this essay gave me their permission to mention their names. Samuel Miller is presently a free-lance photographer, while Christine Snitkjaer is an animation producer at Sun Creature. I chose their testimonies for their transformative dimension, as the Gnawa ceremonies they attended led them to reflect upon their own identities and/or reconsider old aspects of their identities.

²³ Fadi Al-Wazani was a Sunni Muslim from Jordan.

“simply” was not me, that dealing with mean-spirited *mluk* and dead chickens is just not part of my world or anything I want to spend my time doing. But the more I thought about it, [...], the more I realized that perhaps my reaction was more a response to my fear of “losing control” of a situation. I felt helpless during the performance – as if the world could do its own thing and there was nothing I could do to stop it. That feeling scared me. The experience has made me realize that I can’t control the world, as apparent as it sounds.

This dark presence mentioned by Samuel Miller may also be felt during the invocation of the spirit of Sidi Mimun, whose color is black; it may cause some unexpected reactions as it is often accompanied by some intense trance-dancing. People who trance-dance want to accommodate and placate the spirits that inhabit them. Not doing so means that the person will permanently be afflicted with all kinds of ills and troubles. Women who trance-dance move “their heads rhythmically from side to side or up and down to the music, their hands clasped behind their backs” (Kapchan 2007, 14). Usually, the *mqaddema* or another woman wraps a sash around the trance-dancers’ waists so as to make sure that they do not lose their balance and hurt themselves as they fall on the ground. They can also gyrate their heads while on their knees or on all fours, a position that is a reflection of the Gnawa’s former condition as slaves.



Figure 3: A woman trance-dancing during a *lila* in 2011

This very same year (2017), a woman who was trance-dancing suddenly lost her balance.²⁴ Her head hit a wood and glass table heavily. We all heard a loud thud, and some students interjected an “aah” of concern and fear. Had any one of us fallen the way she did, we would immediately have touched our heads to rub the wound or check if there was blood. She did none of this, and resumed her trance-dancing, but for some students this was too much to handle and a few minutes later I had to go outside to check on them. They were holding each other, reassuring one another as a few of them were crying in a state of shock. As I mentioned previously, images, films and videos are not often used in the preparation of our Academic Travel, as we mainly rely on texts. Visual media-generated signs are not part of the construction of the experience they are about to live. As Heitmann points out, “postmodernist scholars [...] argue that our relationship to reality has changed due to technological advances, primarily within the field of media” (2011, 52). One such scholar is Jean Baudrillard who in “Simulacra and Simulations” (1988, 170) explains the successive stages an image – the visual representation of an event – goes through to become a simulacrum:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

The more an image is being re-presented, the more it distances itself from reality. As I do not have at my disposal material pertaining to visual culture, students are not in a position to look for media-generated signs during the performance as none of these signs present themselves to them. They witness a basic reality that has not been represented, that has not been *imagified*, and accordingly has not gone through the different stages allowing it to become a simulacrum. The basic reality turns out to be much more violent than a simulacrum, hence the students’ reaction.

I would like to draw a parallel between the simulacrum-basic reality chasm and MacCannell’s frontstage-backstage dichotomy. The front region, as we have already seen, is meant to make tourists feel comfortable. It is arranged in such a way that tourists know what to expect. They have seen images, perused tourist brochures, read travel guides which condition the way they will experience the landscape, the art, the attraction, or the performance. As a matter of fact, all the media-driven signs are so impactful that tourists look for them once they arrive at their destination. A front region could therefore be likened to a simulacrum: it has been endlessly represented, it feels familiar and has nothing to do with a back region, a basic reality in Baudrillard’s terms. Indeed, when tourists are given the opportunity to travel towards a back region, they cannot anticipate what they are about to see as there is not much information at their disposal, because a back space is not the object of representations, in contrast to a front space. Does this mean that if we are to distance ourselves from the front stage, if we are to deflect the tourist gaze, if we are to enter a back space, we should feel unsafe? Obviously not. However, we need to get out of our comfort zone and in the case of my trip to Morocco, embrace non-Western codes, norms, beliefs and values if we truly want to meet the Other. Not doing so is on the one hand embracing a culture of safetyism that Lukianoff and Haidt warns us “trumps everything” (2018, 30), and on the other, perpetuating a neo-colonial mentality in the sense that everything should correspond to Western values, codes, and norms. Samuel Miller, examining his own reaction, seems aware of this potential danger. Although he states that he “felt afraid at that performance”, he sets aside the idea of feeling safe, focusing on what it means to enter a back space, its unknown dimension:

²⁴ According to Zineb Majdouli losing one’s balance means a lack of self-control, because paradoxically a trance must be aestheticized (2007, 62). Reverting to Kapchan (2007), I would say that the trance-dancer had not been able to placate the spirit inhabiting her, hence this violent loss of balance.

From a Western Christian tradition, I tried to rationalize what I had seen. The only English words I knew were “witchcraft”, “pagan” with all the negative connotations that come with [these]. I am a Christian, culturally at least, whether I like it or not (after four years of University, I don’t like it very much at all). Despite not being terribly devout – as a matter of fact, I am actively running away from religion – sitting in that room that night, the only way for me to make sense of what I was seeing was through this unused spirituality. But in doing so, I reinstalled cultural and religious walls that I had tried so hard to take down.

Samuel Miller’s awareness of what may happen when tourists distance themselves from the safety of a front region and accept to enter a back region is further reflected upon when he asks the following questions: “How are we supposed to view things like this that are so foreign to our daily experience without tunneling into our identity to understand what it means? And in doing so, how do we not simply reinforce our own biases and the things that we know/believe?” He does not have answers to his questions, but concludes: “What I do know is this. I saw something that was utterly different. That was fine. But I also felt something spiritual that was likewise different, and *that was terrifying!* (My emphasis). And for the first time in years, faith/religion/Christianity made sense again.” Entering a back region is transformative: it helps students confront a basic reality, it leads them to reflect upon their own identity. Such a move from front to back regions produces different narratives, as with this testimony that dates back to 2009, the first time Franklin University students attended a *lila*.

As I was getting ready to write this essay, I contacted several students who traveled to Morocco before 2013.²⁵ One of them, Adrian Manguica, wrote back a long message where he reflects about Academic Travel, the tourist gaze, and the *lila* he experienced in Meknes with Abdenbi El Meknassi.²⁶ His reflections summarize what Academic Travel is and can be when students are ready to embrace Otherness, enter back regions, and face basic realities:

Academic Travel was as much about learning how to travel as it was learning how not to travel. One aspect of being a tourist in a foreign place is the insidious and unconscious fetishizing of the Other that sometimes occurs, the unintentional forcing of the subject being observed to perform in the knowledge that they are under observation by paying guests. This is the real danger with Academic Travel. It is structured as a learning experience and that learning is often conducted observationally during short periods rather than gradually and experientially. With the best of intentions, we might leave a country thinking we have “learned” something, when we have only attained a sense of flavors, colors, and impressions lacking a connecting cultural thread. It is only when we give up our own pretensions and expectations, when we exist (usually quietly) in the same space as those from whom we wish to learn that we might say we have truly “experienced” another culture.

²⁵ The year 2013 corresponds with the i.generation – also called generation Z or digital generation – entering college. There is another essay still to write to explain how the millennials and the i.generation deal differently with reality. As Jean Twenge, a psychologist specializing in intergenerational differences, points out “teens are physically safer than ever, yet they are more mentally vulnerable” (2017, 3). In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt further explain that generation Z spends more time alone, interacting with their screens, hence having “fewer offline life experiences than [...] any previous generation” (2018, 148). They add that safety has undergone “a process of ‘concept creep’”: “in the twentieth century, the word ‘safety’ generally meant physical safety”, but in the past two decades, it has “expanded to include ‘emotional safety’” (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018, 24).

²⁶ Adrian Manguica is presently Vice President of Infrastructure at Voyager Space Holdings, a global leader in space exploration.

No Academic Travel I attended was more in peril of falling into this trap than Morocco, and no trip delivered more. It has been 13 years since I travelled with you and I have told the story of “travel done right” anecdotally at least three dozen times through the years with Morocco as a touchstone. I have tried to emulate my experiences in each new place after the lessons learned on that trip, the lessons that true learning happens experientially, silently, while listening, and perhaps even engaging when and where requested. It helped immensely that we knew we were meeting with your old friends, people with whom you had genuine relationships of trust. This made us all feel more like new friends and less like observers. Our engagement, our dancing, felt richer and more welcomed as a result. I suspect there is another subtle lesson I have not thought about since that time: that you make the learning more personal, and therefore more memorable, by making it intersectional with our own background. We travelled to understand the roots of music – Jazz, Blues – with which many like myself feel a deep connection. For this experience and these lessons, I thank you. I carried them forward when I moved to India for two years, I carried them forward when I moved to London for my Master’s and then Ethiopia for my research. I carried them forward when I moved back to Washington DC and felt like a stranger in my own country until I found a little bar that played Bluegrass on Thursday nights.

The moment in time to which I am referring is an instantiation of this lesson. You brought us to the home of your friend [Abdenbi El Meknassi], you secured an invitation for us into his home, where [before the concert], we sat cross-legged on pillows, enjoying a meal served from the home kitchen. The concert led by your friend got underway. Late in the night, an older woman came to the [*rehba*] to perform a spiritual cleansing ritual. It involved dancing and spinning wildly to the rhythm as she passed dozens of lit candles slowly across the skin of her arms. After some time, a blackout hit the city and almost by magic, nobody noticed. The woman kept dancing, the room’s only light given by candles silhouetting her skin, skin that should have been burning but remained unharmed. The instruments played on, providing enough musical energy for her to keep spinning. I remember her silhouette against those candles in that darkness perfectly to this day, and our silence in witnessing it. I am not a spiritual person but it was as close as I got to transcendence.

As Gary Arndt (2011) states in “7 Reasons Why the ‘Authentic’ Travel Experience Is a Myth”, “the very act of being somewhere means that [we] are changing the environment and removes the possibility of having a true authentic experience.” However, the way this millennial student experienced the Gnawa performance was as close to an “authentic” experience as possible. My only wish is to encourage future students to embrace the unknown, the incomprehensible, the different, distance themselves from the simulacra, confront reality with open heart and soul, and finally get as close as possible to a back space each time an opportunity is given to them.

REFERENCES

- Arndt, Gary. 2011. “7 Reasons Why the ‘Authentic’ Travel Experience Is a Myth.” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2011. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/03/7-reasons-why-the-authentic-travel-experience-is-a-myth/72007/>
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1988. *Selected Writings*. Edited by Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. 1964. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Harper.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

- Heitmann, Sine. 2011. "Authenticity in Tourism." In *Research Themes for Tourism*, edited by Peter Robinson, Sine Heitmann and Peter Dieke, 45-58. Wallingford: CAB International.
- Kapchan, Deborah. 2007. *Traveling Spirit Masters. Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*. Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Lukianoff, Greg, and Jonathan Haidt. 2018. *The Coddling of the American Mind. How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. New York: Penguin Press.
- MacCannell, Dean. 1973. "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings." *American Journal of Sociology* 79, no. 3: 589-603.
- Majdouli, Zineb. 2007. *Trajectoires des musiciens Gnawa. Approche Ethnographique des cérémonies domestiques et des festivals de musiques du monde*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Perkins, Harvey C. and David C. Thorns. 2001. "Gazing or Performing?: Reflections on Urry's Tourist Gaze in the Context of Contemporary Experience in the Antipodes." *International Sociology* 16, no. 2: 185-204.
- Thrift, Nigel. 2008. *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. New York: Routledge.
- Twenge, Jean M. 2017. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. New York: Atria Books.
- Urry, John, and Jonas Larsen. 2011. *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*. Third Edition. London: Sage.
- Wright, John. 2002. "Morocco : The Last Great Slave Market ?" *The Journal of North African Studies* 7, no. 3: 53-66.

BIOGRAPHY

Patrick Saveau is a Full Professor at Franklin University Switzerland. His work primarily focuses on the autofictional genre and its first open practitioner, Serge Doubrovsky. He published the first monograph on this author, *Serge Doubrovsky ou l'écriture d'une survie* (Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2011). He then shifted his research interests to the representation of immigration in literature and cinema and co-edited *Reimagining North African immigration. Identities in flux in French literature, television and film* (Manchester University Press, 2018). More recently, he has embarked on a research venture combining filiation narratives and Maghrebi literature, working for example on the first openly gay Moroccan writer, Abdellah Taïa.