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ZINEB BAHJI, Ph.D.
The Smithsonian Museums

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Exhibiting identity : Leila Alaoui's photographic series 'Les Marocains' in context

ZINEB BAHJI, PHD
Smithsonian Institution

Keywords Identity, museum; photographic portrait; double-critique; third-space encounter

Abstract This article analyzes the politics and poetics of displaying Moroccan cultural identity in a photography series, *Les Marocains*, by the late Moroccan photographer Leila Alaoui (1982-2016). The analysis focuses on the dynamics of display at the Museum MVI for Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat to investigate how the museum, as an agent of identity negotiation and expression, shapes a subversive experience of encountering the "Self." It explains how the museum functions as a third-space that invites visitors to rethink cultural identity from a different perspective. The museum opens a space for visitors to practice what the Moroccan sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi called double-critique.¹ The practice of representing identity in museums and the varied outcomes, complexities, and problematics that might rise within such practice have always been critical to the museum institution. This interdisciplinary study draws on Alaoui's series to interpret how the collection, combined with museum display spaces and scenographic installations, deconstructs and reconstructs the idea of Moroccan identity through specific associations. McLean's three layers of negotiating identity in the museum are an essential part of this analysis. The study also touches upon some concepts that are critical to analyzing and explaining the complexities of exhibiting identity in museums, such as identity and the photographic portrait, museum exhibition as a Foucauldian heterotopia and a liminal space of encounter with the "Self" and the "Other," cross-cultural encounters, museums as contact zones, and identity and the gaze.

About the Author Zineb Bahji is a full-time professor of art history and scenography at Groupe Léoard in Rabat, and is an independent scenographer and consultant in the field of museums and museum history in Morocco. She holds a doctoral degree in Arts and Humanities and specializes in museum scenography in Morocco. Bahji is a Fulbright independent researcher at The Smithsonian Museums in Washington D.C., and at the national Moroccan museums, who aims to introduce a newly-developed and interdisciplinary theory of museums in Morocco, and works with 3D vector-based programs for exhibition development and museum digitization projects. She is an active publisher in the field of modern arts and Moroccan museums with *Museum and Society*, University of Leicester, and *The Museum Review*, a Chicago-based Journal for museum professionals. Bahji has given many related talks in Moroccan and American universities. Her areas of research are: art and ethnography in colonial Morocco, postcolonial, modern, and contemporary art in Morocco, Modernism in Moroccan museums, museum scenography, religious items in museums, religion, identity, and modern institutions in the Muslim world.

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Representing identity is a part of a museum's social responsibility worldwide. These cultural institutions have a significant role in shaping identities (Anderson 1983). Museums have always played a role in forging, framing, defining, constructing, and reconstructing personal, cultural, and national identities. Such practice roughly started with the establishment of national museums in Western Europe in the nineteenth century where museums were viewed as symbols of national identity and emblems of Western modernity (Pieprzak 2010). Museums during Western imperialism were spaces that also exhibited indigenous

communities, or the exotic “Other,” in ethnographic displays, as was the case in some ethnographic museums in colonial Morocco. However, exhibiting identity in museums has received substantial reconsideration due to the changing ideologies, mission statements, and stated purposes of museums in response to a more cross-cultural, globalized, and politically-correct world (Edson 1997). In displaying cultural and national identities, museums now serve as sites of identity contestation that introduce new ways of thinking about identities (Leone and Little 2012, 250); they can function as spaces that “denaturalize” the concept of identity in an age where people need to rediscover the concept not as universal, but as an historically and culturally-specific construct that is constantly changing. Museums have a central role in articulating national and cultural identities, and in theorizing and negotiating, using McDonald’s words, “the emerging identity dilemma and trans-cultural identity complex.” (2012, 273)

McLean states that, “The museum is arguably the most fertile arena in which to undertake identity work, and also the most complex.” (2008, 283) The task of displaying identity in museums includes various challenges and issues related to what identity is on display, whose identity is represented and by whom, the significance of the items selected to represent a given identity, and the way these items would be presented and interpreted (McDonald 2011, 170). The context of display is also significant in the process of expressing and interpreting identity. In other words, museum type is another issue to consider when displaying identity since the interplay of matters of documentation, classification, aesthetics, politics, and many others are always present. Identity display in ethnographic museums, for instance, would always face challenges related to the history and nature of these cultural institutions that have their historical roots in Western imperialism. Such display spaces were specifically created to narrate the exotic “Other” through fetishized and fictional dualistic discourses. Their early establishment in colonized territories was meant to epitomize the ideals of Western modernity and urbanization in traditional societies. They were created to define the Western “Self” versus the Oriental “Other” through subjective selection policies, translations, documentations, and interpretations that were not necessarily valid. Decolonizing this exhibitionary complex is a relative task if we consider the binary urban plan according to which it was founded. Also, the new narratives and collections introduced by independent communities in decolonized ethnographic museums are still open to the problematics of representing the “Self” in a physical context that was primarily formed to place it as the “Other.” This representation would also be dependent on a formerly theorizing source and framed within a given dualistic discourse of “exhibiting back.” Accordingly, displaying Alaoui’s series in a local ethnography museum would have yielded a myriad of interpretations and complexities prompted by the nature of this display context. A pertinent question here is: how would a documentary-aesthetic portrait of a Moroccan man dressed in a folk costume be interpreted and narrated in an ethnography museum? How would local and non-local audiences relate to this representation in such a display space? The interpretation of the exhibition curator and scenographer in this case would be substantially influenced by the nature of the exhibition space.

In art museums, the situation is different to an extent, though the aforementioned inquiries might still be included. However, in most cases, these inquiries would be eclipsed by the aesthetic experience that both the modern context and the scenographic interpretation may suggest, and this is the case in the present study.

Drawing on Leila Alaoui's photography series, "*Les Marocains*" (the Moroccans), this analysis investigates the underpinnings and dynamics of expressing Moroccan cultural identity in an exhibition held by Museum MVI for Modern and Contemporary Arts in Rabat, and it strives to show how the exhibition highlights the inherent qualities of the series through creating a subversive space of reflection for the viewers. "*Les Marocains*" was realized by a Moroccan artist, and it depicts Moroccan people in aesthetic-documentary photographic portraits. Displayed in a museum of art, the series attracted both Moroccan and international audiences, and this raises questions about the different experience of the diverse visitors and how they relate to the photographs. However, the main purpose of the study is not to provide an empirical study of visitor experience. Using McLean's three layers of identity negotiation in museums, this article rather focuses on the processes and dynamics of exhibition makers, the content of the series, and the nature of the context in order to highlight the way they express Moroccan cultural identity through their interaction. McLean divides three different layers of identity negotiation in museums, "The identities of those encoding the representation, the identities of those decoding the representation, and the identities of those represented." (2008, 384) These layers inevitably contribute to the way identity is represented and interpreted in museums.

On the artist's vision: the series as archive

In an interview with the French television channel *TV5Monde*, the late artist Leila Alaoui stated that the primary purpose of her photography series, *Les Marocains*, was to illustrate Morocco's cultural and ethnic diversity in an archival series, and to preserve a tradition that was gradually fading away. The idea of an archive or of archival photography already suggests a desire to preserve a framed representation of the past, and a place of memory or collective memory that has a central role in identity formation. The act of archiving and framing in the past also suggests a present process of transformation. In this case, an archive might provide a space for nostalgia and poetic imagination of a romanticized shared experience, or it would serve as an escape from a seemingly dystopian reality of a given community; this space would feed the fantasy of the return to a glorious past and pure origin. To apply Derrida's description of archival fever, the notion of archive suggests, "an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement." (1995, 91) Archival data, regardless of its material nature, is a complex discursive space, and the validity and limitations of any archival element or artefact to objectively represent the past and a given history in general are always debatable. The artist's choice to consider her series archival has two main implications. It first frames a past experience that is to be preserved through archival data, which suggests a desire for creating a memory for something that is fading away, and second, it indirectly introduces comparison with an actual experience where change is an inevitable force. What is archived is no longer a part of the present, but a repertoire that still informs it.

The series as a subversive visual space

"Photography is subversive...when it is pensive, when it thinks." (Barthes 1980, 38)

Before analyzing the different interpretations of the photographic series under study in relation to its exhibitionary space, it is essential to look at the portraits outside of any museal

complex. Independent from all contexts, Alaoui's portraits are an autonomous photographic space that is open to the discussion and negotiation of Moroccan cultural identity. Such visual space is already packed with multiple layers of meaning in its own right.

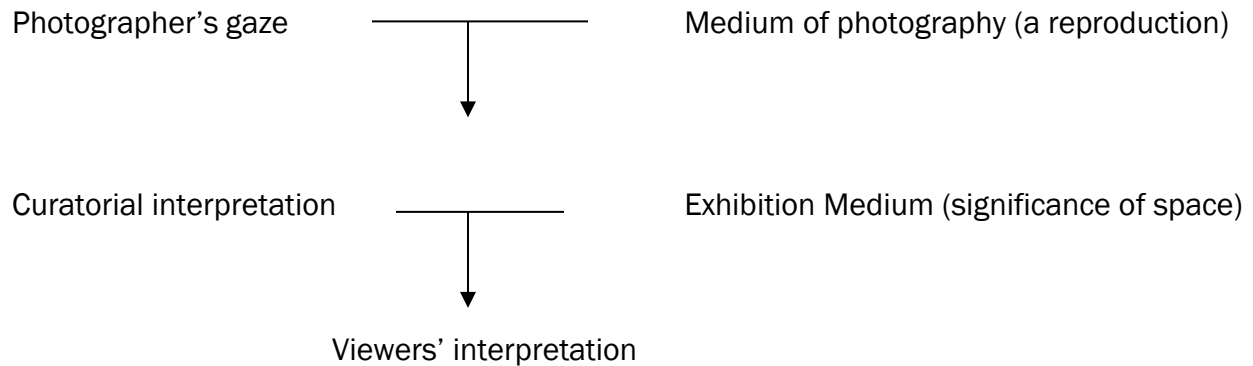
The visual interaction between the photographer and the subjects captured already creates tension and adds complexity to the representation. The photographer's gaze and the medium of photography are also significant here, but how do all these elements create multiple layers of interpretation of Moroccan cultural identity independent of any museal display space? How would curatorial interpretation dismantle and reconstruct the content of the portraits to display Moroccan identity in the museum? How do these portraits represent Moroccan cultural identity? Is it the photographer's subjective interpretation of who the Moroccan people are?

First, the title of the series creates some expectations for Moroccan viewers who would expect to encounter images to which they can relate and with which they can identify. In other words, they would expect to encounter their own images represented through others, as unified by a shared cultural identity. The title establishes a link through the notion of national and cultural identity by means of which the subjects in the series and the viewers become one. Then, the portraits become a heterotopia, which transforms the experience of meeting the "Self." Alaoui's aesthetic-documentary portraits depict a number of typical Moroccan men and women dressed in folk costumes from different parts of the country. Facing these seemingly ordinary images, Moroccan viewers might inevitably slip into a different experience where their consciousness and sense of identity separate by simply being invited to gaze at other Moroccans. Here, the photographer's gaze is inseparable from that of the viewers; as suggested by Barthes, "The photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity." (1980, 12) In this case, the portraits use the idea of "being Moroccan" to establish a sense of belonging in them as a first step, and later to enhance their subversive quality and initiate a pensive, reflexive gaze through the aesthetic manipulation of both form and content. Second, the portraits transcend and neutralize themselves as a medium to shape an imaginary space of reflection and negotiation. The people depicted pose in clear contrast with a black background, facing the viewers in return, as if exchanging looks and creating a liminal channel of encounter where all context is eliminated. The black background tends to highlight the persons posing in the middle, and free them from any context that would have shifted focus on the idea of de-contextualized encounter. Such encounter is beyond what is representational, documentary, and descriptive. The purpose of this liminal experience of encounter is to invite an existential gaze outside of time and place, and to challenge viewers to think of the idea of identity and representation. It is a third-space where Moroccan viewers negotiate their cultural identity.

Further, fine art photography, regardless of its aesthetic and intellectual purposes, and photography as a medium evoke the idea of instant reproduction. Fine art photographic portraits are reproductions of framed, fixed images of given realities; these reproductions have no inherent absolute essence. They are glimpses of a fixed reality where inquiries of objective truth, being, and representation rise in a dynamic outside world. The inability of the photographic medium to capture and represent an objective, absolute truth of the subjects, and the gaze of both the photographer and the viewer create a juxtaposition with the title of the series, and they entail critical reflection on these fixed and framed reproductions.

Nomadic portraits, nomadic identities: combining space and medium to create subversive experiences

In different museum exhibitions, a series acquires additional layers of interpretation that influence the process of identity representation and negotiation. The layers can be described in the present diagram:



The works of Leila Alaoui were displayed at the Museum MVI for Modern and Contemporary Art in 2017 within a seven-month cultural festival that celebrated Morocco's return to the African Union in January 2017. It was a part of a wider exhibition baptized *Présence Commune*, held from March 28, 2017 to June 31, 2017. In this exhibition, named *Memorial*, the photographs were displayed with another series of photographic portraits realized by a Moroccan artist-photographer, Othman Dilami (1986-2016), and another series by the Malian artist-photographer, Malick Sidibe (1936-2016). The theme that the exhibition introduced in this gallery was related to both "an idea" of being Moroccan and African, and to the inevitable fact of changing and becoming as influenced by other cultural influences from within and outside of Africa.

Dynamism in Malick Sidibe's series *Reportages Maliens*: medium juxtaposition

The philosophical nature of Alaoui's portraits and the neutral and subversive space of reflection they create in the gallery stand out in juxtaposition with the portraits of Sidibe. The implications of trans-cultural influences in the exhibition were represented directly by means of selection and composition of the portraits of the three artists, and indirectly through the very practice of identity display in a museum, the use of photography as an artistic medium, and the art portraiture that has its roots in the Italian Renaissance. In Sidibe's series, *Reportages Maliens* (*Malian Reports*), Malian youth posed in traditional or Western-vintage clothing. His portraits captured the culture of post-colonial Bamako youth in the 1960s and 1970s to show how Western fashion trends at the time became a form of identity and self-expression, which reflected the idea of complex trans-cultural identities. Also, Sidibe captured the influence of Western music on Bamako youth at that time in vibrant photographs of everyday life situations. His documentation of the transformation of the Malian society

introduces the idea of dynamism to the gallery and stands in opposition to Alaoui's portraits. Such juxtaposition creates a space of reflection that highlights the idea of being fixed and framed in a neutral photographic space that lacks both a context and a background story, and it also underlines the self-reflective quality and philosophical stance of Alaoui's series. Her portraits strive to invite the viewers to experience a liminal pose and to reflect on questions of cultural identity in an age when cultural influences are reciprocal in both worlds. In this exhibition, the portraits function as mirrors, a utopia within a heterotopia. These imagined mirrors project a certain image on their viewers and create a space that the viewers cannot reach physically, and they invite an encounter with the self through the Moroccan "Other," suggesting a reflective gaze. Such an encounter isolates a given image of identity from consciousness, and gives way to creating new visions on how individuals perceive themselves and their cultural identity.

The influence of Sidibe's iconic photographs on art-photographers and fashion designers in other parts of the world is one example of trans-cultural flow. Also, earlier influences of tribal African arts on Western modern painting in the first half of the twentieth century are another example that highlights such trans-cultural exchanges throughout history. This is further suggested through the spatial combination of Sidibe's photographs with a large monochrome portrait, *Hommage Africain*, 2015 (*African Homage*), by the late artist-photographer Othman Dilami. The importance of the portrait is symbolically enhanced through the use of display space; the work depicts a young Moroccan man wearing a traditional Moroccan hat (Fez) and holding an African mask that hides part of his face. The subject in the portrait does not face the viewer, and therefore does not invite a direct, reflective gaze. Yet, the presence of the African mask introduces a statement about a changing community where African migrants have always been present. The scenography of the exhibition is described in the Moroccan art magazine *Diftyk* (2017) as a space of "Identité Métissées" (interwoven identities). The series have something in common; the works are inspired by both occidental and African references, and they end up merging together. Identity in this case is simply open to the world; it is interwoven in modern Morocco that is Amazigh, Arab, and African like never before.

The museum as a subversive display space: double-critique and cross-cultural flow

"L'Occident est une partie de moi, que je ne peux nier que dans la mesure où je lutte contre tous les Occidents et Orients qui m'oppriment ou me désenchantent."
(Khatibi 2007, 108)

(The Occident is a part of me that I cannot deny unless I fight against all the occidents and orientals that oppress or disenchant me.) Original translation.

Museum exhibitions are places where material culture can be articulated and negotiated outside of a normalized system of beliefs. They are also spaces where imagined notions and intangible cultural constructs can be re-imagined and reconstructed by means of layering different incompatible contexts and historical periods to suggest comparison, analysis, and reflection. In Foucault's term, a museum is a heterotopia where people are introduced to new ways of thinking about "absolute" social constructs through a set of principles. A significant principle that governs a museum exhibition is the isolation and dismantling of concepts; it isolates and decontextualizes objects and notions to allow and inspire new perspectives or

new ways of seeing. The museum here also represents a microcosm of a process of reciprocal cultural exchanges; it becomes a mirror that reflects, theorizes, and explains the trans-cultural flow due to many factors that include ethnoscap² and mediascap³. It shows how the classic notions of communities and cultures are becoming more complex. In the case of displaying personal, cultural, or national identity, museum display dynamics reveal the everyday politics of identity formation by inviting a third-way space of contemplation and philosophical reflection where the viewer becomes a “self-watching individual” (Leone and Little 2012). Another principle of this heterotopia is that it changes and shifts its function in a society over history to contain, represent, theorize, and influence changing communities, and in this case, the museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts reflects a society that experiences inevitable trans-cultural influences in a globalized world. The exhibition here functions as a space of “thinking otherwise” of the social and cultural constructs and phenomena of a people through the accumulation of history. This space yields new discourses on cultural identity that go beyond any dualistic discourses embedded in the colonial experience of African countries. It transcends the center-periphery model of class-cultural influences, and challenges the view that globalization is a process of superimposed ideas from the Occident. In other words, visitors in this exhibition can experience both worlds from an objective point of view to dismantle the classic Occident/Orient duality and to reshape a new hybrid cultural experience that does not deny the Occident or develop the fantasy of the return to an imaginary community with a pure cultural identity. Visitors can analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct both experiences in order to come up with new outcomes relevant to the world of today.

Notes

1. Double-critique (third-way critique/double criticism) is a concept developed by Khatibi in his work *Maghreb Pluriel* (1983). This postcolonial concept draws from the postmodern philosophy of decentralization of hegemonic discourses. According to Khatibi, postcolonial writers should take a third-way critique position that transcends the dialectics and dualities inherent in colonial and postcolonial discourses. They should take an emancipatory position that sets itself free from ethnocentric writings in order to criticize and question both the knowledge systems produced within their own culture and those developed within imperial discourses. This stance aims at understanding and negotiating concepts instead of rejecting them based on their source of origin. Museums as cultural institutions may draw on this theory to reflect on the cultural and social changes and challenges that face post-colonial societies.

2. Ethnoscape is a term coined by the American-Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai among other terms to denote the factors that play central roles in the trans-cultural influences of a globalized world. Ethnoscap^{es} as defined by Appadurai refer to the landscape of individuals or groups in constant motion and who influence and make a part of the shifting world in which we live. Such moving groups and individuals, tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and others, constitute a substantial feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to an unprecedented degree so far.

3. Mediascape is another term coined by Appadurai to refer to electronic and print media and their influence on the global cultural flow through the production and dissemination of images that create imaginary worlds and that influence how groups and individuals perceive the

world, and this also applies to visual culture. See more in Appadurai (1996, 35) on this subject.

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