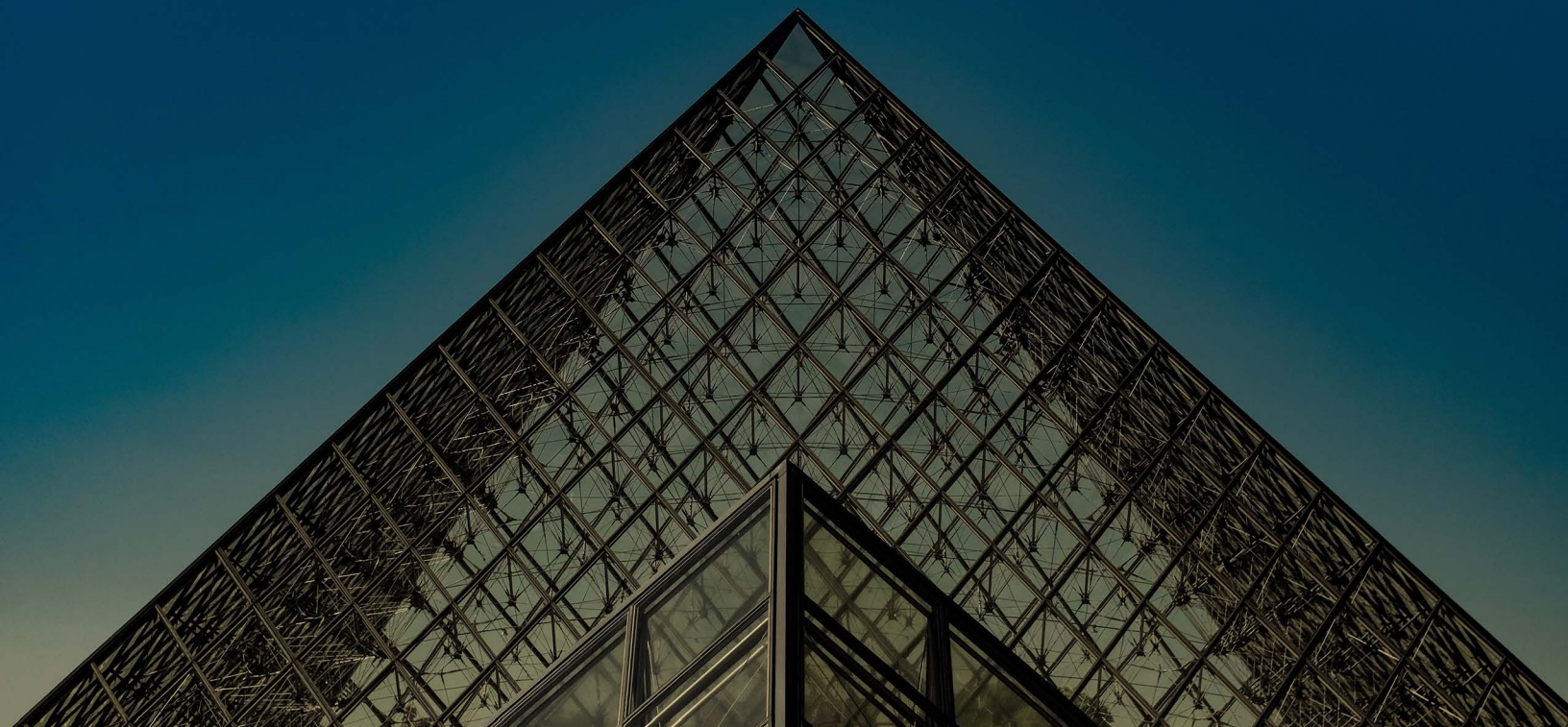




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# A Moroccan in the Smithsonian: narrating America through its museums

ZINEB BAHJI, PHD

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**About the Author** Zineb Salah Bahji is a full-time professor of Scenography, Art History, and Professional English in Groupe Léonard in Rabat, Morocco. She holds a doctoral degree in Museum Studies and Scenography and realizes scenographic projects with Léonard Prod. Zineb Salah Bahji has published a number of museum reviews and articles and has given talks about Moroccan Arts in Morocco and in the United States of America. Her experience as an independent Fulbright researcher at the Smithsonian Museums in 2014 and 2015 has inspired her to document her visits to the Smithsonian Institution and to interpret her encounters with objects and stories there. Her research into Moroccan museums is primarily related to ethnographic museums. She studies their history, origins, and ontology in relation to the binary urban plan that the French colonial regime established during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her premise and interest in museums as interactive spaces that create and inspire alternative visual and written narratives are inspired and guided by both the Moroccan Sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi and the Moroccan author and visual artist Youssouf Amine Elalamy.

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The following text is a passage from a creative essay that is inspired by the Moroccan novel *un Marocain à New York*<sup>1</sup> by Youssouf Amine Elalamy. The text narrates the experience of a Moroccan researcher in the Smithsonian museums through 2014 and 2015. The purpose of the essay is not to provide professional insights on the visits nor to analyze or review the galleries and the displays, but its purpose is to document, through personal impressions, observations, and reflections, the experience of an alien visitor who would encounter American culture inside a number of Smithsonian museums in particular. The narrator, a Fulbright doctoral student from Morocco, experienced American culture and learned new things about American society through meeting more objects on display than interacting with people in actual life. She came to discover new things like the fact that ideas on evolution versus creation are freely expressed and represented in some American museums, which she had never experienced in Morocco. Her experience outside of museum walls was very limited compared to her museum visits, but would museum visits be enough to discover a culture and a people?

## Random Memories

I finally got the chance to visit the world's largest museum institution and research center, the Smithsonian Institution, headquartered in Washington D.C.; it was the very first time I would set foot in the United States of America, a country that I had only known through books, geography classes, novels, cinema, television, magazines, and the internet.

I would discover a country and a culture through an institution of museums, but would that be enough to know more about this culture, anyway? I would not think of my own cultural background; I would wear my detachment goggles as usual. But would my goggles eclipse

my culturally-oriented view of the world? Would they objectively reflect a culture represented and narrated in a set of museums?

I thought that museums were no place for the extraordinary and for the sophisticated snob, like many people believed in my home country! I just thought that being in a museum could make one see things in a different way because the point was to stop, gaze at, contemplate, and thoroughly think about things that we take for granted in the outside world; museums could make anyone see themselves or others with a sense of detachment or estrangement in the most extreme cases, after a few moments of existential gazing. I liked places where I could merely exist but not belong; I felt somehow free, and museums promised me such heterotopia most often. I was a passenger with no luggage.

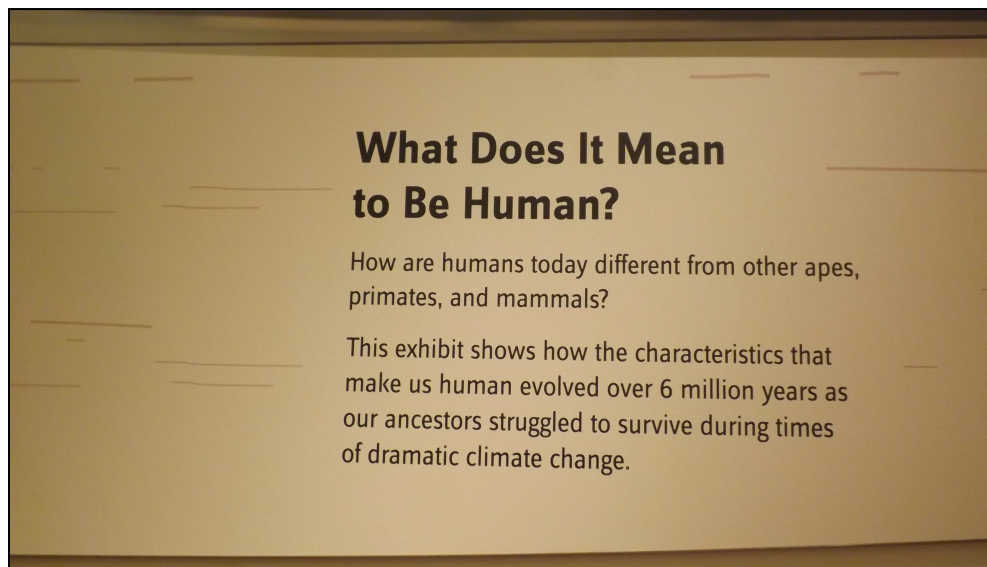


Figure 1. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History wall label. 2014.

### **Into a New World: Adventures of a Moroccan Museum Wanderer**

In *The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade*<sup>2</sup>, the princess tells the king a story about Sinbad the sailor, a story he did not really appreciate. In the last tale of Scheherazade, Sinbad the sailor had the chance to explore nineteenth-century America and Britain on a steamship that he took for a monster. He learned new things then: a new language and the fact that earth was not flat. He took a hot-air balloon for an exotic bird and a steam locomotive for a fast beast. Like Cervantes' Don Quixote<sup>3</sup> who took windmills for huge monsters, Sinbad the sailor was blinded by his romanticized and mythical view of the world; he was so delusional that he failed to separate myth, chivalric romances, and fiction from the reality of a technologically advanced society. His view of the world was tremendously oriented by his culture to the point that he was not well prepared to meet a totally new world in the far, far West, a world of aliens. Just like Sinbad, the jealous, delusional king was not ready to explore the new world. His pillars of certainty were shaken by a modern, outlandish reality introduced through a bad, bad, sinful Sinbad.

So, in Edgar Allan Poe's version of the Arabian Nights, the king kills Scheherazade, and that symbolically marked the fall of the eastern world that was yet holding to tradition and myth. In *Scheherazade Goes West*<sup>4</sup>, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and Islamic feminist,



suggests a different ending to Poe's tale. Mernissi thought that the king could have learned from Scheherazade's tale and took advantage of the experience of a technologically advanced world. He could have adopted some new ideas from an indestructible military and political power and consequently prevented Western invasion. Mernissi also claimed that by killing the princess, Edgar Allan Poe failed to manifest one of the West's fundamental principles: democracy. Mernissi thought that Poe should have made Scheherazade a symbol of resistance against Western invasion; she should have lived, and that was democracy!

Unlike Sinbad and Don Quixote, Poe did not impose his occidental concept of democracy on Scheherazade's world of fantasy. Neither Sinbad nor the king managed to explore a different world through a realistic prism. So, Poe killed Scheherazade and paved the way for a scientific, rational, industrialized, and secular society to rule. Or, was that a twisted advertisement for democracy in the East?

The Americans had left some history behind in the coastal city where I lived in Morocco. To me, that history was mostly related to Papa's Garden, a bar and club that Americans had founded in that city in the first half of the twentieth century and the remains of an American military base in the same city. I had also met Americans elsewhere in my home country, but that encounter was not so pleasing, which started with a medical gaze in my middle school in south-east Morocco. In the late 1990s, American medical personnel, most of whom were interns, provided free but compulsory check-ups in schools and rural areas in that region, and they regularly distributed huge red pills that were very hard to swallow. I experienced this when I was a teenager, and that infamous pill gave me nausea and vertigo for weeks. At the time, rumors swirled that the American government had long been experimenting with medicines, and Africa, the presumable cradle of humanity, was the right place for the evolution of unexpected and bizarre side effects.

### **The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History: Nature Would Always Rein**

I traveled by train from Frederick to Union Station in Washington D.C. then rode the underground metro to Carmen E. Turner Smithsonian Station. After a trip of almost four hours, I finally arrived at the National Mall, a very busy spot in central Washington and a vast area where a set of impressive buildings displayed America's victories and tragedies; they are mega-structures that could dramatically trick one's perception. I contemplated the unique architecture of those buildings that I began to believe I had somehow morphed into a dwarf on my way, somewhere in that speeding underground vehicle. I walked around for a while, trying to decide what museum to explore first. The people also discovering the area were mostly foreign tourists, and they spoke different languages. My ears, which the metro trip had blocked earlier, began to pick up babbling noises and fragments of Russian, Mandarin, Dutch, Arabic, French, Spanish, and many other languages I could not identify, and for a moment I had the feeling that we all were dispersed from a mythical stair-tower somewhere there in the National Mall. It seemed that the whole world had flocked there, like once in Babel, and they were absolutely not of one language, one speech.

I was exploring the area when I spotted an impressively huge tower in the horizon. That marvelous obelisk took all my attention that I rushed to the nearest kiosk for a map of the area, hoping to find more information about it. I learned that the monument was built to commemorate the first president of the United States, and it was baptized in the name of

the founding father: The Washington Monument. I was totally engrossed reading facts about this fascinating five hundred and fifty five foot tall marble obelisk when an unexpected fit of heavy rain surprised the crowds and made them scatter in all directions, seeking shelter. I was completely soaked, head to toe when I found myself, against my will, at the door of the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History, and so nature decided my first discovery visit.



Figure 2. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History entrance hall with Henry the elephant. 2014.

In the entrance hall, I was greeted by a huge taxidermy elephant that I later learned was nicknamed Henry. The taxidermy was in a perfect condition that one would think the elephant was still alive. I got closer to take a picture. The elephant towered over me, so huge and powerful, and the view gave me goose bumps that I felt my primal survival instincts rallying. It was the first time in my life that I was so close to a huge mammal, so close that I could contemplate the creases of its waxy skin.

Henry was a twelve ton, fourteen foot tall stuffed African elephant that greeted visitors in the museum rotunda with its huge trunk. It was impossible not to meet Henry upon setting foot inside. But one could never touch it as this impressive elephant was highly secured. Defense against any curious intruder was among Henry's first priorities, and regular skin waxing was a must. Henry ruled his home, and no one could compete in his natural habitat.

I could not decide if old Henry, being in the United States, a few steps away from the White House, was supposed to identify as a Republican or as a mere African elephant, an alien that arrived there for a spectacle. This dominant mammal could have been proudly painted in white, red, and blue, and his large ears could have been decorated with shiny stars. Its rivalry game would still keep survival of the fittest at its core and cherish a God-given right of self-defense mechanism. Still, free and abundant, Henry could just wear his own waxed skin in the museum and ignore the mess outside created by rioting global warming activists and anti-gun violence protesters. Henry would not mind ice melting of the North Pole or the deluge, either.

### **Existential Vortex: Evolution and Other Things**

I read some interesting information about the process of taxidermy and restoration that Henry goes through every now and then, and I was fascinated by the amount of interest and pampering this old giant was given by the Americans in charge in order to maintain a dead elephant and to keep a spectacle alive. This museum, I thought, would make me discover nature in a different way, one that I had never experienced in Morocco. A label entitled *Evolution Trail* promised me a unique journey. I did not pick up the visitor's map not because it cost a dollar, but I ignored it to satisfy my chaotic nature! I explored the titles of the galleries, trying to see what title would seduce me first, and I finally decided: Mammals. The gallery's entrance was so inviting that it felt like home. The introductory label displayed a gleaming welcoming statement, "Welcome to the mammal family reunited. Come meet your relatives," and a set of portraits of animals displayed on the wall were supposed to be my relatives.



Figure 3. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History exhibition. 2014.

I was homesick, and I thought that 'seeing relatives' would be some good therapy. Here again, a large section label narrated pre-history Africa, and an interactive model of the globe explained to visitors how they all could trace their DNA back to African origins. It said that thousands of years ago, there were extreme droughts and monsoons in the African continent and that modern humans had to leave, heading north, looking for better life conditions. But I asked myself what happened to those who decided to stay, thinking about some paleo-anthropological taxonomies that had my head spinning.



The screen continued to narrate what had supposedly happened thousands of years ago. Many migration waves of anatomically modern humans took place in Africa, and I thought that things did not change that much, anyway, apart from a few things that I could notice. Now, people fleeing drought, poverty, or civil wars and conflicts in Africa had to cross borders that require passports and visas. Cultural integration, which included more than the skill of making hand axes and setting a fire, was a must.

I was reading all those narratives, moving from one label to the other, trying to make sense of a mysterious past of endless metamorphoses when a woman approached me and politely asked, struggling with a broken English, if I could take a photo of her. I noticed she had a Nordic accent as she was trying to explain to me how to use her professional camera. I took a couple of photos of that blonde woman, thinking about the complexity of human nature and the many possible interactions that created a large spectrum of varieties and shades. Once again, I was not satisfied with the museum's narratives, a feeling I had experienced many, many times before back home in Morocco.

The section labels on modern humans and their fellow Neanderthal cousins made me spin among them, mercilessly, like a tennis ball, tortured by my consciousness as a modern human and my annoying tendency to doubt thanks to my cerebral cortex. I was trying to figure out how modern mankind became modern, so modern to the point of invading the moon and getting microchip implants in their bodies. Roaming this gallery and reading a variety of facts that ranged from burial rituals of the Neanderthals in Shanidar, Iraq, the discovery of the oldest modern human skulls in Dmanisi and Africa, to the social life of early modern man, I came across an interactive screen with a wall label that read, "Transform Yourself into an Early Human."

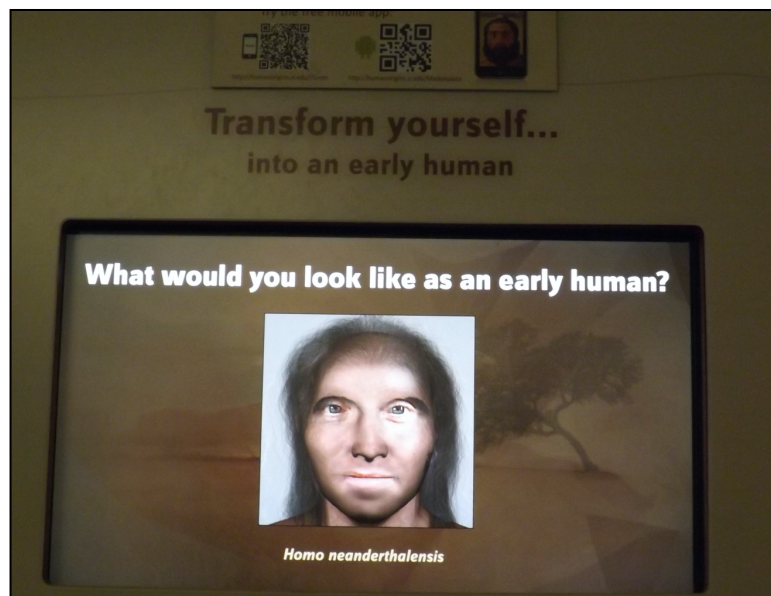


Figure 4. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History interactive interpretive element. 2014.

The smart screen invited visitors to scan their photos and discover how they would presumably look like as a Homo Neaderthalensis. So, modern humans could magically



modify their genetics, borrowing DNA samples from Neanderthals, too, thanks to technological advancement. I first had a strong desire to try it, but I somehow felt insecure after a few seconds of contemplation. I realized I was too scared to encounter a more primal version of myself, and I walked forward, as if running away, towards a large wall label that introduced another section of the exhibition. The label stated facts on how humans had faced many dangers in the past, like crocodile attacks, and how humans have evolved in direct response to a changing world in which dramatic climate changes played a decisive role. I thought that it would be a good idea to use another smart screen in that gallery to help people discover what humans would look like in the future after decades or centuries of exposure to the effects of man-made climate change. I did not care much about discovering myself as a Homo Neaderthalensis, which was sheer fiction at the time, as much as I cared about the future of coming generations who will face the dire reality that their selfish ancestors caused. I thought that other mammals would want to know about the future of their species, too. Some would no longer be there.

Thinking about other mammals, I then noticed that my feet had unconsciously dragged me to the section on modern humans and that I missed the galleries on other mammals, our supposed relatives. I thought I should pay a visit and greet other marvels of nature with whom we shared something called mammary glands, and I later came to discover that we shared more than that.

### **Breast and Body Hair**

In the gallery on mammals, I existed as a female, a woman, and a human. What I shared with the set of female animals in that gallery were a couple of biological functions, breasts, and body hair, to an extent. The interactive label displayed slides that explained the nutritious importance of mammal mothers' milk then displayed some facts on how mammals' hair involuntarily fluffed in acts of self-defense. Every time the screen went off, I saw my own reflection in it, and that annoyed me because I could see my hair, which the rain had recently soaked, was as messy as a mop or an angry hedgehog. The situation grew more uncomfortable as a group of visitors stood behind me, reading, and the screen displayed the line, "Hair can send a warning or serve as a weapon." I could bet they noticed my messy head that blocked a part of the screen, but also served as a very pertinent illustration. My messy mop would indeed serve as a weapon to repel any potential suitor. For a while, I wished to be a real hedgehog. My appearance would not have mattered that much! And if women had been inspired by female apes, they would not have cared much about shaving their body hair or waxing it, nor would they have grown self-conscious about the size and shape of their breasts, showing or hiding cleavage, or breast-feeding in public. I thought it was ridiculous to constantly fight something that nature had created in women, pressured beings who were supposed to invest in time, energy, and money so as to adhere to certain beauty standards set by men. What if all those advertising billboards and magazines had displayed hairy women? What if they had displayed African or Irish women with natural frizzy hair? But the case was different, in this Museum of Natural History, those beauty standards did not matter, even in the gallery of Homo Sapiens where images of early humans and Homo Neaderthalensis left a great deal to be desired.



Figure 5. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History, Mammals exhibition. 2014.

### Science in the Service of Nature

Moving to another section on mammals, I discovered something new about ear bones. A screen displayed a series of facts about the evolution of jaw and ear bones from what it called “our reptile-like ancestors,” and in a direct, authoritative statement it said, “You share these ear bones with all mammals past and present.” Did I really share all those qualities of ear wiggling with hyenas, hippos, cows, and other mammals? Before I could try and wiggle my ears that my messy hair muffled, an African American curator invited the visitors to come discover how scientists in the Smithsonian Research Center dissected heads of dead mammals so as to figure out how these animals could wiggle their ears. A bunch of curious heads followed him through a long corridor, and so did I.

There were displayed heads of different animals in what looked like a laboratory, and a group of scientists worked busily, not minding our presence. I watched them work on a huge head of an African hippopotamus, and I was amazed by the fact that a dead animal had crossed the Atlantic, coming all the way from Africa, so that people in America could learn how it wiggled its ears. That was fantastic. Science for Americans was sacred; it was no wonder these people managed to land on the moon and create a virtual assistant they called Alexa. The hippopotamus could have stayed in Africa, dead, and no one would have cared about this gift of ear wiggling. But this dead animal, something that Africa did not want anymore, was very important to researchers in the Smithsonian. A man's trash was another's treasure. In return, America sent tons of unwanted electronic waste to Africa, including dead Alexas! But the problem was that all those dead devices would not simply shrink and decay, and Africans had to found research centers, too, in order to find out how those chemicals and dead electronic gadgets could rest in peace and dissolve in dumps. But there are other ways to recycle things in Africa. African waste-processors conduct urban mining, smashing and burning those dead electronics, poisoning their guts and the soil, to find promised sought-after gold or copper.

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Figure 4. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History interactive interpretive element. 2014.

Figure 5. The Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History, Mammals exhibition. 2014.

## Notes

1. *A Moroccan in New York* is a novel by the Moroccan novelist and conceptual artist Youssouf Amine Elalamy. The novel, a best-seller, documents the experience of a Moroccan Fulbrighter in the United States back in the mid-nineties who narrates his encounter with American culture in what the local press described as the first novel of a Moroccan that is fully decolonized. The novel is free from the typical binary divisions of the colonized narrator versus the metropolitan center.
2. *The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade* is a short story by American author Edgar Allan Poe that is based on *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of Middle Eastern folk tales compiled during the Islamic Golden Age.
3. The existential hero in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes is one of the interesting characters that the narrator assumes in most of her visits. To her, free will and the freedom of belief are essential on her journey, and she is also aware that her cultural background and gaze, which has weight, might influence her encounter with American society. Still, her ideas on cultural supremacy and her conviction that no society is entitled to impose their beliefs on others are always present in her observations. This should also be promoted by and manifested in democratic museums that she views as existential spaces open to exercises in perception and ways of seeing. Her reflections on the Self and her encounter with the Other, the imagined American, and how the latter is represented in museums by American people themselves, create an existential exercise for her to question humanity in general, and to reflect on the human condition. She assumes the existential protagonist in ethnographic museums in Morocco, too, where she questions the idea of ethnography as an academic discipline and how ethnographic museums, display machines introduced to North African societies during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by colonizers and served as emblems of Western modernity, created a double, a Self and an Other that the colonizer imagined and represented. These museums, most of which were established in Islamic traditional cities to carry out a colonial, binary urban plan at the time, still represented spaces of alienation where ex-colonized societies discovered themselves through the Western prism.
4. See more in Fatima Mernissi's *Scheherazade Goes West*, chapters 1 and 6.

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