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# Gendering the City, Gendering the Nation: Contesting Urban Space in Fes, Morocco

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He who takes his wife out in public divorces her.  
Moroccan proverb<sup>1</sup>

What a woman sees of the sky is only that which passes over the circle  
[the open roof over a household].  
Moroccan proverb

Over the past fifteen years, the appearance of new spaces for social interaction in urban Morocco suggests that an analytical division of Muslim social spaces into “public/male” and “private/female” is inadequate for comprehending the ways city dwellers actively construct gendered social space.<sup>2</sup> During fieldwork conducted in Fes, Morocco in 2001-02, I noticed that arguments over how women should occupy particular social spaces often prompted discussions over the appropriate place of women in Moroccan society at large. In local disputes concerning how to regulate interactions between unrelated men and women in spaces that often seem designed to facilitate their interactions, more was often at stake than a single place. Debates over the possibilities and limitations that delineate gendered urban space speak to larger contestations over the position of women in modern Muslim nation states like Morocco.

Divisions of space such as “public” and “private” are frequently mapped out onto gendered space, with the assumption that one gender’s entry into another’s space constitutes a social transgression. However, as women and men in the Middle East and North Africa increasingly occupy the same public spaces for social and economic reasons, women’s presence and movement through public space must be reexamined. Urban spaces, in particular, offer an opportunity to examine how discourses of modernity are accepted, contested, or transformed by their users. In this paper, I examine women’s disputes over social space in the city of Fes to show how people navigate competing

ideologies to test the limits of gender. In the Moroccan context, two particularly prominent ideologies are represented by gender-focused discourses of the nation-state and its Islamist critics. The nation-state characterizes the Moroccan female citizen as simultaneously modern, secular, and Islamic, while an oppositional religious discourse frames the nationalist vision as hopelessly enslaved to Western secularism, suggesting that the Moroccan woman needs to “return” to an authentic, “traditional” Muslim identity, modeled after the imagined example of the Prophet.<sup>3</sup> The spread of both discourses has been influenced by the constant flow of Moroccan migrant populations between Morocco and Europe, North America and the Middle East, and the proliferation of new communication technologies like satellite dishes, internet, and cell phones.

Responding to both positions, Fassi<sup>4</sup> Moroccans often draw on local meanings to create identities for themselves that resist and transcend these ideologies. These include notions of what it means to be Fassi and female, shame as a positive attribute, and hospitality. I use Michel de Certeau’s concept of “everyday practices,” to show how practitioners of culture regain their agency as they manipulate competing ideologies and turn them to their own ends (1984:xiv). Whether Moroccan women are arguing over the divisions of space in an exercise club or over how to respond to an invisible suitor met over the internet, their everyday practices illustrate how users appropriate social space, articulate conflicts, and respond to ideologies in locally meaningful ways.

The Ville Nouvelle<sup>5</sup> of Fes offers a unique opportunity to observe these processes in urban areas of the Muslim world that are not considered central to political and economic operations of power. An examination of provincial cities complements existing anthropological studies of urban areas of the Middle East and North Africa that have focused on cities that are loci of government and political power, such as Cairo or

Casablanca (e.g. Ossman 1994; /Singerman 1996; Hoodfar 1997; Ghannam 2002; Salamandra 2004). The provincial characteristics of a city like Fes, with a population of over a million residents, make it an interesting area for inquiry. Recent studies that focus on the lived experience of individuals in Moroccan urban environments have focused on the hegemonic effects of media, modernity and globalization, and on the hybridity of women's expressive discourses in the marketplace (e.g. Ossman 1994; Kapchan 1996; Cohen 2005). In *Picturing Casablanca*, for example, Susan Ossman characterizes Casablanca as a postcolonial space predicated on representation and colonial planning, governed by abstract media images that lead to a fragmented existence. In part this reflects a trend in anthropological studies of urban space since the 1980s to focus on representation and on the city as text (Jacobs 1993:827). This article, while indirectly concerned with similar issues, seeks to revive the specificity of a lived city, examining how discourses from outside are received and interpreted by individuals.

Academic research in Fes has largely ignored the Ville Nouvelle in favor of studies of the ancient *medina* as a site for religious learning and where "traditional" trades and profession are still practiced. Yet Fes, like other Moroccan cities affected by French colonization, is divided. The Ville Nouvelle, constructed during the French Protectorate (1912-56), with its substantial population of modern city dwellers remains on the margins of academic debates. How do individuals in Fes, particularly women, situate themselves in the built environment? How do local and global discourses interact in the gendering of this modern Muslim city? More importantly, which discourses are most salient to women as they determine the rules for occupying new urban spaces? These questions shed light on the ways in which national and global processes articulate themselves in a specific local setting.

The focus on everyday practices and individual efforts to contest or manipulate discourses of power, enables a shift away from framing this inquiry as a study of the ways “traditional” people deal with “modern” spaces and ideologies. The reified nature of this construction is limiting, as it continues to associate tradition with all that is “native,” while modernity implies something imposed from above, usually from the West. Moving away from considering colonial and postcolonial space solely in terms of issues of representation and reception, De Certeau’s emphasis on individual tactics that insinuate, manipulate, and finally reappropriate social space is better suited to highlight human agency in response to powerful ideologies. Everyday practices consist of those small, sometimes fragmentary tactics that represent “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong” (de Certeau 1984:xvii). In Fes, women give meaning to social spaces by using their own cultural categories to shape space in a way that reflects the construction of a female, Moroccan and Fassi identity. However, this is not a neutral process. Individuals’ contestations of urban social space transcend the creation of individual identities. In defining the meanings and uses of new spaces, individuals make claims for collective visions of gendered identity and relationships. Everyday practices, rather than being mere individual tactics, are profoundly social. In this case, gendered everyday practices assert individuals’ ideas of the proper place for women while simultaneously responding to and transforming various discourses about the position of women in Moroccan society.

Figure 1  
(fashion show.jpg)  
Caption:  
Fassi woman in fashion show of antique caftans.

## **Fes: representations of an “Islamic” city**

Historically, the city of Fes was renowned for its merchants and artisans, and for its reputation as a center of Islamic learning. The area referred to today as the *medina* was constructed in 808 by Sultan Idriss II, shortly after the Islamic conquest of Morocco. Fes served as the capital under various dynasties and in the 15<sup>th</sup> century received waves of Muslim and Jewish immigrants expelled from Muslim Spain. However, by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Fes had begun to decline in national importance, and under the French Protectorate in 1912, the capital was moved to Rabat, where it remains to this day. One of the great imperial cities of Morocco, the *medina* of Fes has long been a favorite topic for Orientalist historians, who asserted that Fes embodied the essence of the “Islamic city” but paid little attention to actual social organization (Abu-Lughod 1987:157).

French colonial historian, Roger Le Tourneau (1949) characterized Fes as the preeminent Islamic city in Morocco, asserting that longstanding residents of the city evinced a moral, religious, and civilized temperament that was unlike that of other Moroccans, particularly those from the countryside. Early Orientalist scholarship set the tone for later interpretations by focusing on themes (e.g. Islam as an urban religion, centrality of urban institutions like the bazaar, mosque, public bath; lack of municipal organization) said to be characteristic of the “Islamic City,” which continued to dominate scholarship.

Conceptions of space rigidly associated with public/male and private/female also accompanied these characterizations. This repetition of the same themes and descriptions illustrates what Edward Said has described as the Orientalist tendency toward citationary practices, whereby new representations were built upon old ones and “the actualities of the modern Orient were systematically excluded” (Said 1978:177).

The French built the Ville Nouvelle of Fes after the Protectorate began in 1912. Their practice of separating *medinas* from Villes Nouvelles in Morocco, which Janet Abu-Lughod (1981) has called “urban apartheid,” was a new strategy befitting Morocco’s status as a protectorate, designed to protect native customs and simultaneously to create a modern city of order and administration. In colonial administrations, power became dispersed through the social system to operate internally and productively, producing institutions characteristic of the modern nation-state but also individual modern subjects (Mitchell 1988:xi). After Independence in 1956, Moroccans with the economic means moved into the Ville Nouvelle, as the French had neglected the *medina*’s infrastructure. The Ville Nouvelle provided better sanitation, transportation, and electricity, and most of the city’s business opportunities and bureaucratic services (Porter 2003:130). Today, the *medina* has become overpopulated due to rural to urban migration, with a population density of more than 1,000 inhabitants per hectare. Although UNESCO declared the city a world heritage site in 1980, little has been accomplished in the way of renovations. The economies of both the Ville Nouvelle and *medina* remain largely unindustrialized, with the majority of workers employed in artisanal, commerce, and civil service positions. The official unemployment rate for Fes is 20% (Guerraoui 1996:161).<sup>6</sup>

Moving beyond a focus on the *medina*, on Fes as an “Islamic city” or on representations of the city’s colonial past, this study seeks to examine individuals in the Ville Nouvelle and their concrete ways of transforming urban space according to distinctive local conceptualizations. This analysis of everyday practices in Fes looks not only at how power is dispersed through space but also at how people appropriate, manipulate, or transform discourses of power. Accounts that privilege the old *medina* as characteristic of a timeless, essentialized Fes, and the Ville Nouvelle as a place that has

been corrupted by colonialism and other imported modernities are misleading. As a space of Moroccan social life, the Ville Nouvelle is important for an understanding of contemporary social processes.

For the middle class Ville Nouvelle residents among whom I conducted my fieldwork, the *medina* serves as an object of nostalgia, as a symbol of the former apogee of Moroccan civilization, and as a place over which they feel proprietary even if they no longer own property there. The rural/urban divide long noted by scholars working in Morocco is echoed in opinions of Ville Nouvelle residents about the residents of the *medina*, as the latter are referred to disparagingly as uncivilized people from the countryside (*'arûbî*) who are held responsible for the deterioration of the old city (Porter 2003). Many Ville Nouvelle Fassis trace their family origins back hundreds of years. Fassis have an reputation in Morocco for being influential, they are assumed to be working hand-in-hand with the government, receiving favors, and occupying prominent positions in business and politics. My informants bore the same prominent names and origins of those who had moved on to achieve success in the economic and political centers of the country, Casablanca and Rabat, but most came from middle class families who enjoyed only limited local political and social influence. Some had inherited family businesses or civil service positions, but others were unemployed and had no immediate prospects. The wealth of a great-grandfather who once had the ear of a sultan was now considerably dissipated among heirs, and in some cases remained a nostalgic memory.

These middle and middle-upper class Ville Nouvelle residents were ambivalent about the *medina* and rarely went there, except to shop for jewelry or household goods (e.g wool, traditional wooden furniture). Bewildered by the tourists' preference for what they saw as a dirty, overcrowded space overrun with rural migrants, informants

frequently talked about the Ville Nouvelle's cleanliness and order.<sup>7</sup> They were proud of its tall high rises, wide boulevards, cafés, and modern administrative buildings. While in Casablanca there have been some attempts to preserve the city's 1920s art deco architecture, in Fes many of the original French structures have been demolished in the past decade to make way for new high rises. In the central Ville Nouvelle neighborhood where I conducted my fieldwork, gleaming white apartment buildings had begun to tower over the old French-built arcade where many of my informants lived. Known as "Lux" for the old Cinema Lux that was torn down in the mid-1990s, this neighborhood had originally been a Jewish quarter, and there were still a few older Jewish residents left who had not emigrated to Europe, Israel, or North America. Since the late 1990s many of the older French structures had been purchased and torn down by developers. The self-defined "pure" or original Fassis moved further out into newly created suburbs.

For eighteen months in 2001-02, I lived in a new apartment building in the "Lux" quarter and conducted fieldwork among residents of this neighborhood. My husband is a member of an extended family still occupying one of the old French buildings, and this fact gave me access to the everyday lives of people I otherwise would not have met. By participating in meals and other quotidian activities with his family, and being present for special events like weddings, I got to know several local extended families and their networks of friends and professional associates. The broad objectives of my fieldwork were to learn more about new roles for women in Moroccan society in light of agitation for changes to the *mudawana* family codes.<sup>8</sup> My fieldsites included the neighborhood itself, a women's non-governmental organization, a hotel nightclub, the exercise club described in this article, and the local streets, houses, cafés, public baths, schools, shops

and offices that my informants frequented. Data was gathered by participant observation, and structured and unstructured interviews, genealogies, surveys and maps.

### **The public/private dichotomy: North African meanings and contexts**

An examination of Fassi views on women's presence in existing urban spaces provides an interesting window onto tactics used in the gendering of new spaces. In Fes, the mixing of unrelated men and women is an endeavor fraught with tension. In the street, a woman's presence is acknowledged by catcalls and stares. What are the rules in a Moroccan city for women's behavior in new public spaces<sup>9</sup>? These "rules" are constantly discussed, challenged, and negotiated. Social scientists working in the Middle East and North Africa have long noted the culturally idealized orientation of women toward the home and men toward the street. "The most important rule in the code of movement," writes Willie Jansen about Algeria, "is that one should remain within the space reserved for one's own gender... The feminine space is directed inwards, toward the courtyard; the masculine space is directed toward the outside, the streets. The difference in available space reflects the social hierarchy between the genders" (Jansen 1987:183). Other analytical representations of the public/private dichotomy locate this divide within Islam and the idea that mixing between the sexes will lead to social chaos (Mernissi 1987). The street has been described as a place of reason, as opposed to the irrational, emotional world of women and the home (e.g. Eickelman 1976). More recent work has challenged the public/private dichotomy, arguing that much like Orientalist writings about the "Islamic city," the public/private dichotomy reflects Western secular biases and a tendency toward binarisms (Göle 1997; Bier 2006). Other studies demonstrate a more nuanced analysis of the meaning of the public/private. For example, Kapchan (1996)

documents women's roles in the marketplace while Deeb (2006) describes their roles as political and religious activists. Holmer-Eber (2003) analyzes women as transformers of social networks.

Spatial seclusion of women was a feature of urban Moroccan society until the 1940s (Mernissi 1994). In 1943, King Mohammed V presented his daughter in public without a veil, and around the same time, Moroccan nationalists instituted programs promoting education for girls (Mernissi 1987:155). After Independence, particularly in the 1970s with the government's creation of civil service positions, numerous women entered school and the workforce. In the 1960s alone, female employment increased by 75%. The large majority of female workers during this period held jobs either as low status domestics or higher status government civil servants, other worked in agriculture and textiles.

Figure 2

(cigarette seller010.jpg)

Caption:

Cigarette and candy seller, Ville Nouvelle of Fes.

Despite the fact that spatial seclusion of women, particularly among the urban elite, was a feature of Moroccan life prior to the 1940s, it should not be assumed that women had no place in public life. Describing the seclusion of urban elite women, colonial officials and historians of the region imposed Eurocentric interpretations of public and domestic space onto local contexts, which meant that women's activities often went undocumented. In North Africa, women always played a significant role in regional economies, although they were underrepresented in French colonial statistics because work was only counted in terms of observable markets and not domestic economic

production (Clancy-Smith 1999:28). Yet, the spaces in which women moved depended upon environment, economics, and social class, and were not easily reducible to a set of rules or prescriptions.

Because the visible range of movement for women has expanded in the past forty years in response to changing political and socio-economic conditions, examining specific ethnographic performances can provide a useful view of how women conceive of their presence in different spaces. As urban women increasingly come to occupy previously “male” spaces, a breach in territorial distribution and domination opens up, limits are crossed, and the separation between “male” and “female” space is called into question. Navez-Bouchanine suggested that while traditional spaces in urban Morocco often demarcate public and private space, the structure of the Villes Nouvelles lends itself to space that is neither public nor private, but often simultaneously both (1991:135).

Through discussions *about* place, Fassis attempt to negotiate and sometimes delineate space and the rules for inhabiting it. Whoever defines a space assumes that he or she refers to a set of rules all can agree upon. However, often individuals contest both the space and the rules for its occupation, particularly in the case of new spaces. At times, women extend principles for conduct in the home to a public space. The code of conduct for women requires that women “*t’hasham*,” which literally means “to be ashamed,” though my informants explained that “*t’hasham*” meant being polite, obedient, pleasant, and demure, particularly in front of elders, men, and non-kin. All my Ville Nouvelle informants agreed that *t’hasham*-ing was a positive attribute best demonstrated by Fassi middle-class women, in contrast to the conduct of *medina* women, whose country origins led them to be loud, ill-mannered and uncouth.

Other principles of conduct are more nebulous. Some Fassis stated their belief that women should not be seen by unrelated men without being fully covered. This belief extends to the idea that unrelated men and women should not share the same space, which was disputed by women who frequented cafés, claiming that ignoring the men who shared the same space was sufficient. Being associated with a particular family is also thought to guarantee a good reputation, particularly in cafés. Public spaces contain conflicting resonances, encouraging women to be both visible and invisible, simultaneously acting in the public realm yet out of reach. The threat of incurring social judgment, circulated by “gossip,” the *klam dīyal nās*, is always present. As a bewildering array of new social spaces open up, whether to label them as public or private becomes less important than comprehending why Fassi Moroccans contest those spaces, and in which instances a particular viewpoint will prevail.

Moroccan society remains gendered, with many social activities limited to interactions with persons of the same sex. Examining the complex tactics of women’s everyday practices sheds light on the logic of gendered social urban spaces. Through these tactics, women not only define their presence in physical and metaphorical spaces (the cyber world) but assert divisions according to social class, age, employment status, education, and religion. Many still associate women with domestic space, so that women’s occupation of public space is often inflected with attempts to redefine such spaces as partly domestic or private, hence suitable for female presence. Frequently, men and women are present in the same places but are associating solely with their own gender. In cases where the inevitable mixing of unrelated men and women takes place, Fassi women borrow from available rules for interaction, such as attempting to remain unseen or ignoring the presence of men entirely. In case of conflict, the concept of

“shame” (*hshûma*) may be invoked to trump an opponent, suggesting that the other has strayed too far and is in danger of losing all morals. In new spaces people quarrel fiercely over how men and women should relate to one another and how women are to occupy the space. I never witnessed similar debates concerning the presence of men. Most of the debates I heard were between women. Only when prompted, men made statements about women and space.

### **Common Domains: Street and Café**

The complex “rules” for occupying the mixed spaces of cafés and streets involve successfully balancing appearances with actions, with the threat of being perceived as sexually promiscuous as the punishment for transgressions.<sup>10</sup> Women were more likely to be present in the Ville Nouvelle cafés than in the cafés of the *medina*. Among my middle class Ville Nouvelle informants, younger professional women and students (ages 20-45) went to cafés. Yet older women and those who did not work or attend university never visited them.<sup>11</sup> Professional women who visit cafés rarely sit with men, although they often greet co-workers at other tables before sitting at their own. Female university students noted that they went to cafés to study, but also to talk and flirt with the male students.

Although men claimed they had no problems with women’s presence in cafés, they also qualified that there are certain cafés where women might not feel comfortable. “Some of the cafés just aren’t clean (*naqî*),” Karim, an unemployed man in his thirties, said.<sup>12</sup> “A place should be clean if it is for women. Women would not like the popular (*sha’abî*) cafés because they are so dirty (*mûsikh*).” In the Ville Nouvelle, *sha’abi* cafés are often places that were built by the French, with décor that seems not to have changed

since. Describing a café as “dirty” (*mûsikh*) also conveys class differences. Middle class residents of Ville Nouvelle frequently refer to cafés in poorer neighborhoods or the *medina* as *mûsikh*. A café that is *mûsikh* might also be filled with smoke and men who are *zûfriya*, types who are inclined to bother women, drink alcohol, and start fights. There are also upscale cafés that, while physically very clean, are known meeting spots for prostitutes. These have attracted the label of *mûsikh*, illustrating that in this context, cleanliness is a social category associated with morality.

The level of comfort professional women expressed about particular cafés often related to whether proprietors were cognizant of women’s places in familial, professional, and social networks. Association with a particular family guarantees that café owners will be hospitable and that women will not be harassed. The guarantee of hospitality here transfers principles from the private domain into the public, as a householder would never allow guests to feel uncomfortable. “Everybody here knows me,” Naima, a lawyer, said of the café near the courthouse where she worked. “I work with all these people, and the waiters will not let anyone bother me.” This tactic applies rules of hospitality and respect for guests to a world that was once solely the domain of men.

Figure 3  
(fes street scene.jpg)  
Caption:  
Women in the Ville Nouvelle.

For women, streets, unlike cafés, do not encourage lingering. The street is a pathway between destinations: market, school, work, or home. While women are always in motion, men lounge on corners or outside cafés. For men, the street outside one’s building is an extension of the home, and a place to hang out with friends or relatives.

However, men also tend to remain in the street closest to their own homes unless they are visiting friends elsewhere. Streets in unfamiliar neighborhoods possess an unwelcoming quality that encourages men to keep moving. During the daytime, women run errands or take walks with other women, but at night (except during Ramadan), women do not go out. My informants noted that Fassi women distinguish themselves by their demeanor, and that they should not be too aggressive, loud, or forward. Girls must conduct themselves unobtrusively, and those who do not fall in line are scolded that they “have no shame.” Young, unmarried women are at a dangerous, vulnerable age, and they should do everything possible to avoid gossip. Yet at the same time, they need to dress stylishly, wear make-up, and be visible to attract potential husbands, who might see them in public and then ask around the neighborhood about the girl’s family and marriageability. Street harassment is an issue, and the severity of harassment varies with tightness of clothes, facial expression, and the time of day; all potential indicators of sexual availability. In fact, the most common explanation Fassis of all ages gave for harassment was that it was a way of determining who might be a prostitute.

“Men just talk to see who might go with them,” a middle-aged woman, Fatima, explained, “and if the woman answers, it means she is fair game. A good girl (*bint an-nâs*) is ashamed and will never answer them.” Women’s presence in the streets is fraught with more tension than inside cafés. Fassi women in their twenties spoke of the social pressure they felt to be seen in public wearing the latest clothes, yet they walked a fine line in trying not to accrue negative judgment. This constant balancing act often results in a split in women’s self-image. Fassi culture insists on an acceptance of some parts of a modern, Western-oriented image and a rejection of others. Yet which parts are to be accepted and rejected is uncertain.

Media images contribute to this confusion, and satellite television, now accessible to all middle class Fassis, provide provocative images from MTV, European and American movies, and soap operas. Simultaneously, satellite programs from the Middle East convey the contradictory message that the acceptance of Western fashions represents the Muslim world's dependency and enslavement by the Christians. Some Fassi women have adopted a more Islamic style of dress in response. The practice of veiling (that is a headscarf or *hijab*) is one tactic that many younger women have begun to employ in public spaces. Whether they do this to avoid harassment or demonstrate their piety, this concealment has variously been interpreted as extending the private space into the public, or as signaling the wearer's intentions not to engage the public.<sup>13</sup>

### **Tactics in New Spaces: Exercise Clubs and Cyber Clubs**

As the preceding section demonstrates, in public spaces women must maintain a careful balance between visibility and propriety, advertising their beauty while creating a sense of separation between themselves and the words and gazes of unrelated men. But what are the rules for spaces that are neither exclusively public nor private, such as a mixed exercise club or a cyber café? Located in a new apartment building close to the old French racetracks and a former army barracks, "American Steel Fitness"<sup>14</sup> was the first club in Fes to have separate floors for men and women, so that middle and upper class Fassis could exercise every day, rather than on a rotating schedule, as in other clubs. Female customers (between 20 and 50 years old) could pass through the men's space on the ground floor, but men were not allowed to come upstairs. Yet the club was poorly designed, and the women's aerobics space was visible to the men by a balcony that could

be clearly seen in the slanted mirrors that reflected down into the men's space. When the owners realized this oversight, they installed curtains to appease their female customers.

However, the heavy velvet curtains presented an added problem. By late spring of 2002, the weather had grown quite hot, and when the curtains were closed, the air did not circulate. Women began to quarrel about whether the curtains should remain open or closed, even when there were no men below. Most of the grumbling went on among women in their late twenties, the older women rarely participated. Almost always the demands to close the curtain were obliged. On one particularly hot day, Amina, who exercised in a headscarf and a tight leotard, arrived late to find the class already in session and the curtains wide open. Visibly angry, she shut the curtains with a flourish. Another woman, a perfectly made-up beauty who often went down to the men's floor for "weightlifting demonstrations," decided to challenge her.

"Come on," Miriam pleaded. "I'll stand there where they can see me if you care so much."

"Shame (*hshûma*) on you!" Amina snapped back. "It's *haram* (forbidden) for the men to be able to leer at us while we exercise."

"There's nobody down there to see us!" Miriam said.

"Do you have no shame? The curtains stay closed, or else I am leaving the club!" she threatened. The instructor continued to teach the class, the two women glaring at one another in the mirror. Afterwards, in the dressing room, the drama continued. "Who does she think she is?" said Miriam. Amina was out of sight, but Miriam spoke loudly. "She's no prize. Does she think the men want to look at her anyway?"

"And in this heat!" her friend chimed in.

“She acts like she’s so pious, but it must come from the heart, it’s not how you dress or whether the men can see you!” insisted Miriam. “Those fundamentalists (*ikhwaniyîn*), they are impossible to understand. They wear tight clothes; they cover their heads. She’s crazy. This gym is not for fundamentalists. If she doesn’t like it, she should stay in her house.” Miriam grabbed her shampoo bottle and stormed off to the showers.

A second scene, which I witnessed late one afternoon in a Ville Nouvelle cyber café, revolved around similar issues. Qur’anic recitations blaring from one computer competed for attention with American hip-hop from another, and with the din from the café below us, filled with people. At this time of day, high school or university students occupied most of the twenty computers. As usual, most were engaged in Internet chats, and next to me, three teenaged girls whom I knew from my neighborhood wrote to a boy in Tangier. Zahra in particular was interested in him, and on his request that she send him her photo. “You are beautiful, and I want to meet you,” he typed back in French, as the three girls laughed, the main one blushing and covering her face with her hands. “Wait, look, he asked you something else,” one of the girls said, pointing at the screen. The girl read his question out loud. ““Are you a virgin?” Eh, of course! What does he think I am? Shame on him!” she said indignantly, and then typed in “*Hshûma*. Of course!” She looked at both of her friends. “*Hshûma!*” she announced again. The mood for flirtation having passed, she looked at her watch and closed the computer screen, announcing that it was time to go.

When American Steel Fitness opened up in the winter of 2001-02, it was very popular among affluent Fassis. I joined ASF shortly after it opened, and over the next several months I developed acquaintances with some of the other members. Founded by a Moroccan-American and his American business partner, ASF advertised itself as an

American club. Equipment was imported at great cost from the United States, classes were to start on time and with a high level of professionalism, and in the future, the male and female floors would be mixed. At first, middle-upper class Fassis responded enthusiastically, and the club was always packed with women. In locker room conversations, women bragged about their travels overseas—summers on the Costa Del Sol in Spain, and the exercise clubs they had experienced in France, where men and women exercised together. A few women even trickled down into the men's section to observe "weightlifting demonstrations." For a while, the club was a symbol of a new cosmopolitanism that well-to-do Fassis previously had to go outside of the city to find.

Yet gradually the novelty began to wear off. The aerobics instructors complained about their low, "un-American" wages. The showers were often broken. These were American prices for Moroccan quality, people grumbled. But the most contentious issue became the fact that men and women were sharing the same space, albeit on different floors, and that men could gaze up into the women's space from the mirrors. Amina was the most vocal in pointing this out, and before every aerobics class, I heard women comment whether one of the "fundamentalists" would show up and insist on the curtains being closed.<sup>15</sup> Amina complained that the men might one day try to sneak up to the women's section. Initially most of the customers had accepted the premise of the owners that Fes was ready for a Western-style club in which men and women would eventually exercise together. But with the increasingly strident voices of the "fundamentalists," the other women became more hesitant. Many ceased asserting their opinions that the club should be mixed. Soon the only women speaking were the ones who insisted on the closing of the curtains.

In the scene I described earlier, tensions that had been simmering finally came to the surface. Miriam, who wanted the curtains open because of the heat, described her opponent as being attentive only to the surface appearances of piety. Those who desired a strict separation of men and women ought to stay at home where no one could see them. But Amina, whom I interviewed about her views on the club, did want the convenience of belonging to an exercise club that was open to both sexes every day. “I know in America this is how you do things,” she told me. “But this is Fes. We’re Muslims. It’s *haram* (forbidden) the way some of the women act here.” Amina, who was in her early forties, had recently started wearing the *hijab* and seemed interested in pointing out to other women that they were, as she said, “not acting like Muslims.” She stated that it was important to remind people of the proper distance between men and women. Creating this distance was the issue, particularly due to the problematic placement of the mirror, which revealed what the separation of floors should have concealed.

Miriam, who argued with Amina but did not criticize her to her face, did not seem cowed until Amina had accused her of having no shame. Her religion was her business, she said, and Amina had no right to judge her. Shortly after this argument, she stopped coming to the club, and membership as a whole dropped. Eventually the two owners returned to the United States, leaving the management of the club in the hands of the Moroccan-American owner’s family. The owners expressed their disappointment that Fassis “were not ready” for such a club. Miriam agreed, distancing herself from the women who wanted the curtain and calling them “typical Fassis.” Although she was born and raised in Fes, she was not interested in claiming to be a Fassi, and instead called attention to her Meknes roots. When I spoke to her about the fact that she had stopped coming to ASF, she told me in French, “I can’t stand to be around hypocrites. It’s

because of people like them that this city does not progress.” She distinguished between her own open-mindedness and Fassi obsessions with decorum, which she felt were entirely on the surface. Again, concerns with appearance and not reality were what Miriam felt the “fundamentalists” were focusing on, but she also emphasized that her differences with Amina related to categories of identity and not religion. Although many middle-class Fassis were decidedly non-judgmental about religious matters, they did distinguish subtly between their own moral behavior and that of Moroccans from elsewhere, a distinction that Miriam used to emphasize not morality but hypocrisy.

The exercise club was not easily classifiable as public or private, male or female, and thus, women argued over the physical separation of male and female space within the club, even when no men were present. Arguments in favor of the curtain posited the culturally valued attribute of shame over the cosmopolitanism and class-bound distinctions that the club originally carried. Assumptions that middle-upper class Fassis would accept “American” ideas about the appropriateness of mixed exercise clubs proved not to be true, and in this case, neither social class nor age were significant predictors of how women would respond to the issue of the curtains. While women who shared Amina’s view on the curtains did not manage to convince the others of the correctness of their position, once the concept of “shame” was invoked, many simply left the club.

Cyber cafés are another new setting where men and women occupy a mixed space, both literally and metaphorically, as they browse the internet. Diverse groups of people share the cyber café for multiple purposes, ranging from job hunting and game playing to looking for a spouse, or listening to Qur’anic recitations. In 2002, Fes seemed to have a cyber café on every block of the Ville Nouvelle. Over time, the fees had gradually decreased to around 50-70 cents per hour, which has made internet use more

widely available to middle class Fassis. Most of the customers are under the age of 50, with the majority under 30. Young people have colonized the cyber cafés in Fes, both in the *medina* and the Ville Nouvelle. Chat programs, conducted in French or English, are popular with unmarried men and women, especially high school and university students. For women in particular, having a boyfriend in cyber space can mean escaping the watchful eyes of parents and communities. A few unmarried professional women in their 20s and 30s even forged relationships with Moroccans in other cities that occasionally resulted in clandestine meetings, others conducted forbidden relationships with foreign men.<sup>16</sup> Fassi men use the internet to meet foreign women, and some marriages (and emigrations) are facilitated as a result. There is a marriage service for the very religious, where devout Muslims all over the world post personals.

Undoubtedly the internet has assisted in the widening of social boundaries, offering increased opportunities for interaction between men and women (Skalli 2006). The internet also provides safety for those who wish to hide behind its anonymity. Yet certain Fassi values, such as the honor of maintaining female virginity prior to marriage, are emphasized, as revealed by the conversation between the young women and their faceless male interlocutor. In the episode described earlier, Zahra was quick to send her photo to her chat partner. When he inquired about her virginity, she accused him of “having no shame,” not because this was an embarrassing question, but because she was offended that he did not automatically assume her purity and good intentions.

Figure 4  
(young\_Moroccan\_women\_jpg)

Caption:

Middle-upper class Fassi teenagers at a New Year’s Eve Party, 2001

The cyber cafés and the metaphoric space of the internet, are new sites in which interactions between men and women are not strictly regulated. Like in the regular cafés, in the cyber cafés men and women sit at neighboring computers but largely do not interact with one another. In cyberspace, however, gender mixed conversations are the order of the day. Women control to whom they will speak and what they will reveal, and whether to arrange physical meetings or limit their encounters to the printed word.

The narrator in Algerian novelist Assia Djébar's *Fantasia* writes, "When I write and read the foreign language, my body travels far in subversive space, in spite of the neighbours and suspicious matrons; it would not need much for it to take wing and fly away!" (Djébar 1993:184) Writing in French in internet chat programs, Moroccan women are like the three Algerian sisters in Djébar's novel *Fantasia*, who created a "secret spirit of subversion" by conducting pen-pal relationships with men all over the world (ibid:12). That French was the language of colonialism was not an issue for the young women I described in this incident. The usually spoke Moroccan Arabic but conducted their chats entirely in French. "It's just easier," Zahra claimed. "I don't know how to type on the Arabic keyboard." She admitted that her parents would not have approved that she was chatting with boys, but she said, "the people you meet [on the internet] are not in the same room with you. There's no danger. I haven't done anything wrong." As for the people who shared the physical space of the cyber café with Zahra, she never talked to them, and she almost always came with her girlfriends. The presence of her friends as witnesses to her online relationships may have served as proof that Zahra was not doing anything wrong, but Zahra simply said she liked to go to the cyber café with her girlfriends because it was fun. Other young women, however, use the internet alone.

The world of the internet allows Fassi women to create new relationships that might transgress community standards of morality while simultaneously upholding personal moral codes. Using programs designed in other countries for use in languages that are not their native tongue, young Fassi women nonetheless appropriate the cyber space as their own. Demonstrating agency in manipulating the technologies and languages of others for their own purposes, they exhibit a strong sense of adherence to local values. Such instances demonstrate that while rules for women's behavior in new spaces are not always clear, women themselves navigate among competing ideologies to occupy those spaces according to their own standards.

## **Conclusion**

These debates resonate well beyond the individual cases that I provide, as they speak to a larger vision of the role of women in the Moroccan nation-state. Images of how women should occupy public space are abundant, in magazines, newspapers, television media, and government discourse. On the one hand, the Moroccan government promotes a unitary vision of the "Moroccan woman" as "the guardian of Moroccan cultural values at home and the proponent of modernity outside her house" (Moroccan Government 2005). Meanwhile the Islamist position represented by nationally known figures such as Nadia Yassine and Abdelilah Benkirane, leader of the religiously oriented Party of Justice and Development, argues that women's entry into the public sphere and demands for equality threaten the integrity of the Moroccan family and, in fact, the strength of the entire nation.

These representations of the ideal Moroccan woman respond to other issues in Moroccan society, most notably the 2000-03 conflict over legal reform of the Moroccan

personal status code governing a woman's rights in marriage and divorce. The media tended to dichotomize these debates, representing positions over women's status as falling either into the more secular government camp (which nonetheless claims a religious basis for its formulations) or the more explicitly religious one. However, an interpretation of Moroccan women's presence in urban spaces indicates that women themselves do not fall neatly into these two categories. Small-scale disputes over space reveal how women engage with and resist competing ideologies that might circumscribe their movement or force them to compromise their sense of morality.

Imbuing public spaces with aspects of the domestic sphere is one tactic by which Fassi women make their presence in urban public spaces more acceptable. But they are also acting in ways that are new and unique, creating a bricolage among available rules for conduct and improvising where necessary. The concept of shame proves to be socially significant, and Fassis invoke it when situations are muddled by the presence of competing ideologies (Guessous 1984). "Shame" is a tactic used to control the terms of interactions in new social spaces: the American-style exercise club or the internet. Although some lower and middle class Fassis often assume that the elite follows an imported, Europeanized moral code in their behavior, the conflicts over men's visual access to women in the club reveal that this is not always the case. Even elite women have conflicting ideas about how men and women should occupy a shared space. Similarly, the incident in the cyber café demonstrates how women in cyber space subvert community controls while simultaneously adhering to the local values. When subject to analysis, situations in which the gendered quality of a space is challenged reveal the current fault lines within Moroccan culture, and the issues that are contested. Controlling the dynamics of women's movement and its meanings is an activity in which disparate

groups in Fassi society have multiple political stakes. High levels of unemployment for men, the circulation of new discourses over women's rights and empowerment, and efforts to define Moroccan relationships to Islam are some of the issues that complicate the presence of women in new, mixed spaces.

As Fassis negotiate the terms of their engagement with each other in new public arenas, the loss of shame is not the only threat to cultural integrity. People seem uncertain whether signs of the changing position of women in Moroccan society reveal a positive or negative future. Some grumble that educated women take jobs away from men, while others claim that giving women more rights in marriage will lead to more divorces. Disagreements about women and space reveal profound uncertainties as to the future of the Moroccan nation state, and as gendered territories are metaphorically defended or conquered, disputes reveal that more is at stake than the matter over which women are arguing. These are not merely debates about the degree of interaction between men and women in an exercise or a cyber club, but arguments over the interpretation of culture, and over conflicting views on how women should behave in an increasingly mixed society. Women in new, mixed spaces are, after all, doing other things besides exercising and searching the internet. They are making economic contributions to the welfare of their families, receiving university degrees at a rate comparable to that of men, participating in the public sphere through non-governmental organizations, demonstrations, and even parliament, and demanding to be accepted on their own terms.

Women's tactics shape urban spaces in unique ways, not only affecting the character of the Ville Nouvelle of Fes but also revealing the ways discourses about the position of women in the Moroccan nation state are rejected or appropriated by users. Visions of nation are not crafted solely in the media, economic and political capitals but

in provincial cities, towns, and rural areas, where the processes through which individuals define and make use of space are no less significant. Although the gendered character of new urban spaces often remains ambiguous or unresolved, the debates themselves are interesting for what they reveal about local efforts to negotiate competing ideologies in gendering new urban spaces, and by extension, the nation.

### **Figures**

Figure 1

(fashion show.jpg)

Caption:

Fassi woman in fashion show of antique caftans.

Figure 2

(cigarette seller010.jpg)

Caption:

Cigarette and candy seller, Ville Nouvelle of Fes.

Figure 3

(fes street scene.jpg)

Caption:

Women in the Ville Nouvelle.

Figure 4

(young\_Moroccan\_women\_jpg)

Caption:

Middle-upper class Fassi teenagers at a New Year's Eve Party, 2001.

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### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “*Alli da mrato li jamaa, taytlaqha*” and “*Ma t-tshûf min al-sma ghayr dûz al-halqa*” These two proverbs were known to older Fassis, many younger people were unfamiliar with them.

<sup>2</sup> The public/private dichotomy remains a much-debated framework of analysis in anthropology and Middle East Studies, criticized for being more of a reflection of Euro-

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American constructs than of the societies studied. See, e.g. Lamphere 1993; Nelson 1974; Pateman 1983; Afsaruddin 1999; Bekkar 1997; Abu-Lughod 1986.

<sup>3</sup> A website published by the Moroccan government from 2000-03 best represents the government's position. Slightly altered since the revision of the personal status codes governing a woman's rights in marriage and divorce, the website continues to promote the same ideologies concerning the ideal Moroccan woman. For the opposing religious discourse, see Benkirane (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Name given to residents of the city of Fes.

<sup>5</sup> "Ville Nouvelle" refers to those districts of the city built by the French protectorate (1912-56) and since. While numerous studies have been conducted in the *medina*, little attention has been given to how Fassis interact with the French-built environment, and build over and around the original French buildings.

<sup>6</sup> As of 2002, urban unemployment nationwide was at 18.3%, rural at 3.9%, averaging 11.6% for the whole country (El Aoufi and Bensaïd 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Middle and upper class Fassis blame rural migrants for the deterioration of the *medina*. Yet Megzari (1984) shows that many property owners in Moroccan *medinas* are themselves middle and upper class Moroccans who rent to rural migrants but refuse to maintain the structures.

<sup>8</sup> Changes included the increase of grounds on which women can petition for divorce, raised the age of marriage, and placed some restrictions upon polygamy while not outlawing it altogether.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "public space" as a place of free assembly where individuals do not have to pay to gain admission. Because access to the exercise club and cyber cafe is restricted to those who can pay, this limits participation there to middle and middle-upper class Fassis. "Public space" is distinguished from "public sphere," for which I follow Habermas' definition of a public sphere as a space "where private people come together as a public" (1991: 27) to form opinions and mediate between family and state.

<sup>10</sup> Women spoke of not wanting to be taken for a "prostitute," but this did not literally mean being confused for one. Rather, this term was used along with a few others loosely meant to identify a woman who engages in illicit sexual activity.

<sup>11</sup> Regular socializing outside the home for the middle class Ville Nouvelle women who did not spend time in cafés took place in the public bath (*hammam*). In the neighborhood of Cinema Lux, women of all ages go to the *hammam* once a week and stay for hours. But many younger professional women have foregone this practice and dislike the *hammam* because it "takes too much time" and is too "traditional," an activity they associate with their mothers' generation. See also Buitelaar (1998).

<sup>12</sup> All personal names are pseudonyms.

<sup>13</sup> I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for offering the latter observation. For debates on veiling, see Chebel 1988; El Guindi 1999; Hessini 1994; MacLeod 1991; Mernissi 1987 and Zuhur 1992.

<sup>14</sup> I did not change the name of the club.

<sup>15</sup> "Fundamentalist" was used disparagingly by the young professional women at the exercise club. I am certain that the women who wore a *hijab* would have objected to being called "*ikhwaniyyîn*," as it had certain class (rural migrants who had fallen into extremist groups) and cultural connotations (the Egyptian brotherhood, the Taliban) and was a term that many religious Fassis did not wish to be identified with.

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<sup>16</sup> According to Islamic law, a Muslim man may marry a Christian or Jewish woman, but a Muslim woman cannot marry outside her faith unless her husband converts. It is for Moroccan women to marry foreigners, while relationships between foreign women and Moroccan men are widely accepted.

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