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*Jemaa el Fna:* “Imagined” and “Real” Experiences of Spaces of Spectacle

Upon encountering *Jemaa el Fna* Square and the surrounding souks in Marrakech, Morocco, first-time visitors find a chaotic mass of performers, juice stands, and vendors all vying for the attention of those who may come to make a purchase. Trying to escape the Square, one may venture behind into the souks—into the maze-like passageways of vendors and cafes hidden within the medina. These passages can show the wonders of Morocco’s crafts, exhibit splendid scenes from café terraces, or illustrate just how lost one can get within the depths of the medina and within one’s imagination. This is exactly the “imagined” context of their visits—the chaos of the Square buttressed by the chaos of finding your way within the souks of Marrakech. Over the last century, a multitude of writers and travelers have commented on their experiences of the Square, creating a certain “imagined” nature of this place which is qualified from those as close as neighboring cities and villages or even from minds across the world. However, the Square importantly functions for the residents of Marrakech bringing together a place where a family can be entertained, buy essential items or perhaps a new blanket or jacket, as well as eat for a relatively cheap price. In many ways, these “real” environments of experience for city residents complicate the “imagined” places of the Square, creating a unique juxtaposition within the atmosphere of the area. The “imagined” performance environment of the Square and surrounding “real” everyday use areas have been discussed by Beardslee (2014) and Schmitt (2005), but neither choose to pursue this particular interaction between the “real” and “imagined” experiences in further, ethnographic detail.

In this discussion, I will analyze the complexities of Jemaa el Fna Square and surrounding marketplaces of Marrakech to understand not only how the environment is produced and re-produced by tourists, but also how it is produced and re-produced by the city’s residents. The discussion will be structured around participant observation, field notes, and interviews with both residents and tourists in the city, examining the intersection of the “imagined” and “real” environments for visitors to the Square. In essence, the paper will explore how the “imagined” tourist realm intersects with the “real” residential realm of this region to argue that while tourism partially structures these areas, the “real” areas also function to support and provide a place for negotiation and amusement for Marrakech residents.

*Erin Gould is currently a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Anthropology from the University of California, Riverside. She has spent the last year conducting her ethnographic dissertation fieldwork in Marrakech. Gould’s dissertation focuses on hikayat and halqa (forms of Moroccan storytelling and performance), and how young people are adopting and transforming these practices in innovative ways. Connecting discourses of art and anthropology, Gould was the lead ethnographer and presented original artwork concerning memory in a series of community-based arts and anthropology exhibitions in Riverside, CA. She will continue working and living in Marrakech until August 2018, in order to complete more fieldwork, as well as to begin writing sections of her dissertation.*