



SPECIAL FOCUS: SPOTLIGHT ON PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Seeing and Hearing Omar ibn Said

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Abstract

This article will illustrate how using interdisciplinary student-faculty collaborative research can help decolonialize Islamic Studies. This article will be based on a case study of our recently completed student-faculty collaborative research project, Seeing and Hearing Omar ibn Said. Faculty members led a student-faculty research and public outreach project regarding Omar ibn Said, an enslaved Muslim man from the Senegambia region. The students' work focused on the biographical opera *Omar*, which was planned for debut at the 2020 Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. This interdisciplinary collaboration combined religious studies, history, and performance studies. The students produced outreach materials designed for public engagement and education. Ultimately this article brings to light several important topics: the pedagogy of interdisciplinary studies, giving students agency in an interdisciplinary setting, and the lack of recognition of early Muslims in America.

Keywords: student-faculty collaborative research; Muslims in America; interdisciplinary studies; pedagogy; structural racism

Introduction

Complex and persistent structural problems, such as structural racism and historical inequity, require complex solutions. In pedagogical terms, this means that an interdisciplinary approach must serve as the foundation of student engagement with these issues. In the summer of 2020, three professors designed a student-faculty collaborative research project that engaged two students in the multidisciplinary study of history, religious studies, and theatre. Our project goal was to allow students agency in research on the writings and experiences of a Muslim individual of local and national historical importance, Omar ibn Said, whose life would also be the subject of an opera scheduled to debut at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, that summer. We combined our respective areas of research expertise in area studies, religious studies, and performance studies as project mentors in order to create an interdisciplinary student-collaborative summer research project.

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Our approach aimed to decolonialize the idea of Islamic Studies and question who speaks for Islam by giving agency to students, while also repositioning Islam *within* the United States instead of viewing it as a religion foreign to the United States. Our method consisted of studying Islam from within the United States and using students as researchers to create public outreach projects. These projects gave students an opportunity to create a tangible product that could be used by the public, giving their work meaning beyond the classroom and academic sphere. By focusing on the experiences and legacies of enslaved African Muslims, our project seeks to uplift the voices and memory of Black Muslims in America at a time when it is especially urgent to do so, and it repositions our classrooms and research projects so they allow the once-erased a voice.

Our student-collaborative research was funded by a grant program at our institution where students were paid hourly for their work and faculty were paid a stipend. Our project was a five-week deep dive into learning about the Spoleto Festival, the new, soon-to-be-debuted opera *Omar*, and the historical details known about the lead character, Omar ibn Said. Our faculty included professors from area studies, religion, and performance studies work, with two students who both had a background in Middle East and North African (MENA) coursework and in Arabic.

How the Project Was Envisioned and Funded

In fall 2020, a high-powered art event, the debut opera of *Omar*, with issues of slavery and Islam at its core, was scheduled to be set and presented in our own backyard – Charleston, South Carolina.¹ Importantly, the music, libretto, choreography, and major roles in the opera were all created by African Americans. This is unprecedented in the history of American opera, making this the ideal event for students in the South to attend and study. It became our mission to find a way to fund attendance at the opera as well as the Festival’s adjunctive art exhibit and orchestral event, Fred Wilson’s “Afro-Kismet” and *Get Out* with Michael Abels conducting the score while the film played on the big screen. Because working at a small liberal arts college allows close faculty interaction across disciplines, the environment was primed for interdisciplinary collaboration. Faculty often spend time together in informal conversational spaces on campus, such as the faculty dining room, where collaboration and brainstorming occur over hot, Southern “meat and three” style lunches. These relationships make it very easy to quickly generate momentum for a unique educational idea, which was essential as the Spoleto season was announced only a few months before the performances.

Immediately there was a constraint on the project in that donor-patrons were given confirmed access to only six tickets for the opera, which was anticipated to exceed the usual demand for seats. We imagined that we could find a way to procure a one-time subsidy from the college for a couple of professors and two to four students to attend and include a small amount of interdisciplinary preparation regarding the titular character, Islam, and the arts. The

¹ Wofford College is located in Spartanburg, South Carolina, a three hour drive from Charleston, South Carolina.

work was done through the co-author's school's Student-Faculty Collaborative Summer Research program, which were most typically awarded to STEM disciplines. We expanded the initial idea to an experiential, research, product-driven educational experience for the students and professors. This project is a wonderful example of how collaboration builds on the strengths of different professors. One professor with knowledge of the theatre world could find and acquire tickets and coordinate events with hotel and restaurant accommodations, but had no idea how to pay for it all. We could envision the project and write a proposal for the grant money. The backbone of research on Omar and Islam would be provided by the third member of our faculty team who had already spent time researching early enslaved Muslims in Charleston. It was quickly becoming apparent that this project had the potential to become a new model for student-faculty collaborative research. The knowledge that one's very specific interest could become the center of a learning event is extremely inspiring, regardless of the final outcome. We felt empowered by mutual intellectual interest. To achieve novel forms of student-faculty collaboration, the primary objective must be learning in a new way. In our summer research project, we were happily put into the position of learning from the students since they were assigned to create their own paths through the Omar story. With our interdisciplinary approach, they had many options to start them on their research path.

Our initial plan envisioned students and faculty working for five weeks at approximately 30 hours per week in summer 2020 on the project *Seeing and Hearing Omar ibn Said*. Students and faculty were scheduled to spend a few days in Charleston in late May, attending the Spoleto Festival and viewing the Omar opera. The four weeks thereafter would have been spent on campus. Plans changed due to COVID-19. The Spoleto Festival was cancelled and the opera's debut was moved to summer 2021. Students were not able to live on campus. We shifted our plans and made all five weeks remote via Zoom and cancelled the trip to Charleston. We still were able to research Omar's life and learn about the festival and how his opera was created.

Background of Omar ibn Said

Omar ibn Said (c.1770-1864) was a Muslim scholar and theologian from the Fulbe people of Futa Toro in the Senegambia region of West Africa. Omar spent some 25 years in the formal study of the Islamic religious disciplines of thought (*'ulūm al-dīn*), including at prestigious urban centers of Islamic learning in the Senegambia region, such as the city of Bundu. He was captured and sold into slavery in 1807 and was taken to Charleston. He was enslaved on a plantation in the vicinity of Charleston until he fled in 1810. He was then recaptured in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and spent the rest of his life in the possession of the family of James Owen of Bladen County. He died in 1864 at the Owen family farm at Cape Fear.² Omar wrote a number of letters in

² Ala Alryyes, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 3-4.

Arabic during his long captivity in North Carolina, including his autobiography. Due to his evident learning and literary production, he became well known to the local community during his lifetime. There are numerous aspects of his life worth focusing on from a pedagogical perspective. Two of these aspects had particular importance for our collaborative research project: Omar's life as emblematic of the indigeneity of Islam in the early United States, and Omar's own profound voice as a theologian and religious thinker.

Many thousands of enslaved Muslims were brought to the present-day United States, especially throughout the 1700s and the first years of the 1800s. This means that Islam formed one of the earliest religious communities in American history, though the lives and experiences of these Muslims have been largely silenced from both the historical record and the popular consciousness because they were enslaved. Estimates vary on the exact number of enslaved Muslims who were brought to the United States before the Civil War, though it is agreed that it was in the many thousands. Jeffrey Halverson's recent estimate gives a sense of the possible size of this community. He estimates that between approximately 68,000-138,000 enslaved Muslims were brought to North America.³

Of the many ethnic backgrounds that comprised the enslaved Muslims brought to America, Muslims from the West African regions of Sengambia (Omar's homeland) and Sierra Leone predominated. Moreover, the largest proportion of Muslims from these regions were brought to the South Carolina and Georgia low-country. This was because people from the Senegambia and Sierra Leone regions often had skill in rice and indigo cultivation, and these crops were grown heavily on plantations in this region of the United States.⁴ West African Muslims were thus a large and distinct religious community present from the earliest days of colonial America. This pedagogical point is always impactful on students: Muslims practiced their faith in large numbers in the oldest American colonies, but they did so under conditions of enslavement. This tradition of Islamic practice in these parts of the United States persisted in secrecy and in the face of severe persecution until the turn of the twentieth century, where its last traces are visible in oral accounts from the isolated barrier islands of the South Carolina and Georgia coastline.⁵

Omar's voice as a theologian and religious thinker is equally significant in a pedagogical setting. He reports in his own autobiography that he pursued a life in theological scholarship before being captured in the course of military service.⁶ He reports studying at Bundu, one of numerous important urban centers of Islamic learning at that time. Bundu in particular was renowned as a haven for Muslim intellectuals who were part of theological movements of rebellion and resistance against local rulers who were complicit in the selling of Muslims

³ Jeffrey R. Halverson, "West African Islam in Colonial and Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36.3 (2016): 414.

⁴ Michael A. Gomez, "Muslims in Early America," *The Journal of Southern History* 60.4 (November 1994): 685-86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 706-10.

⁶ Alryyes, *A Muslim American Slave*, 61.

into the transatlantic slave-trade.⁷ The details of Omar's life indicate that he was probably a supporter of Abdul Kader Kane, a Muslim reformist leader who overthrew the Denyanke aristocracy in Omar's homeland of Futo Toro in Senegambia in 1776 in order to end that dynasty's practice of selling Muslims into slavery.⁸ In 1807, a coalition of opponents of Abdul Kader Kane defeated him and sold his supporters into slavery, including Omar ibn Said. Omar ibn Said's own theological outlook was therefore strongly influenced by this ideological climate, and his extant letters abound with meditations on God's justice and references to God's liberation and eventual victory over tyranny.⁹ In addition to the concept of divine justice, Omar's theological insights also focus on God's dominion over all earthly events, revealing the subtle and profound ways that he attempted to understand the extremely difficult and traumatic circumstances of his own life (including his complicated relationship with Christianity). The details of how these themes were utilized in our pedagogical setting are analyzed in detail in the discussion section below.

Background of Spoleto and Omar Opera

Spoleto Festival, founded in 1977, is a (some say *the*) premier international arts festival in the United States in that it not only imports dance, theatre, jazz, musical, and sundry performance-based offerings, it also produces two to three original operas each year. This hybrid model is very unusual for arts festivals. Its founding was the culmination of "a number of players who shared the vision of a Charleston counterpart to the Festival of Two Worlds that Gian Carol Menotti had founded in Italy's out-of-the-way Spoleto in 1958."¹⁰ Menotti, an established opera composer with many New York City productions, returned to his native Italy to find a place to stage a festival, and "in February of 1956, Festival Foundation, Inc. was established in New York to solicit ongoing support in this country for the participation of American artists in the Italian enterprise to take place in the small Umbrian hill town of Spoleto."¹¹ With the involvement of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) on the part of the American artists training in Italy at the festival and festival leadership, the idea for an American-based counterpart emerged. The search for a city ensued.

⁷ Sylviane A. Diouf, "God Does Not Allow Kings to Enslave Their People: Islamic Reformists and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," in Ala Alryyes, ed. and trans., *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 166.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 169-74; J. Spencer Trimingham, *A History of Islam in West Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 151.

⁹ See, for instance, his inclusion and usage of the 67th chapter of the Qur'an, *Sūrat al-Mulk*, at the beginning of his autobiography: Alryyes, *A Muslim American Slave*, 18. This Qur'anic chapter discusses God's total dominion over all human beings, emphasizing that it is God who is truly sovereign over the lives of individual human beings, not any human ruler or master.

¹⁰ Wes Blomster, "Fanfare for Charleston, The Founding of Spoleto Festival USA," *The 2001 Spoleto Festival USA Program Book*, published by Spoleto Festival USA Marketing and Public Relations Department, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Nancy Hanks, the first chairman of the NEA, was from North Carolina and “encouraged consideration of a city in the South, where the arts did not yet enjoy the prestige accorded them in large cities elsewhere in the country.”¹² And so it came to be, primarily through the herculean efforts of the mayor and the president of the College of Charleston, that Charleston was chosen to be the place, especially given the city’s intoxicating effects on the maestro and his Chamber Music architect, Charles Wadsworth, who said, “Southerners connect with each other in an easy and direct way, and I felt something special in the air in Charleston.”¹³ Spoleto Festival offers a number of student apprenticeships across several of their departments, making it an excellent candidate for undergraduate research. Upon discovering this opportunity, one of our students has decided to pursue this as an option post-pandemic.

In 2019, Spoleto Festival USA announced that in conjunction with the University of North Carolina’s School of the Arts, an opera on the life of Omar ibn Said had been commissioned for their 2020 season.¹⁴ Nigel Redden, Artistic Director of Spoleto Festival USA, is fond of saying, “At Spoleto we tell the stories that need to be told,” and it seems that the endeavor to produce *Omar* emerged at a moment in American history when reckoning with the racial injustice of the present can be informed by recovering and retelling stories from the past. Storytelling became a predominant theme in the work of our two research students, and we cannot help but think that we helped catalyze that by focusing on a singular figure from the past whose little-known story is now coming to light. The students benefited greatly from the fact that each of their three faculty mentors had their own story to tell and their own passion regarding the subject matter to impart. Naturally, our students began to own their projects, discovering the storyline of their interaction with Omar ibn Said.

Discussing the Actual Summer Work

Time Spent Studying Omar’s Memoir and Letter

In our summer research, two aspects of Omar’s life that proved to be the most pedagogically impactful were the presence of large Muslim communities in early American history and the profound theological nuances and insights of Omar’s writings. Because our religion co-author had observed the importance of these two topics in previous sections of his REL 221 course, Introduction to Islam, these two themes were highlighted during the first two weeks of the summer collaborative research project. During this time, students were assigned background readings and participated in guided discussions in order to lay the groundwork for the development of their own research projects.

The first week of background readings focused on Ala Alryyes’s edition of Omar’s autobiography, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said*. Students studied Alryyes’s own analysis of Omar’s autobiography, in addition

¹² Ibid., 19.

¹³ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴ “Rhiannon Giddens Is Writing an Opera,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2019.

to the original text itself. This important volume also includes essays describing the context and background of Omar's text and other works, in addition to material written and published about Omar during his lifetime, including the essays cited above by Diouf and Gomez. These materials and discussions enabled students to develop a familiarity with Omar's life and the experiences of Senegambian Muslims in early America. During this week's discussions, the students emphasized the importance of conceptualizing Islam as a faith with deep roots in early America, but also as a faith whose experience during this period was conditioned entirely by enslavement, which meant it enjoyed none of the benefits of religious tolerance and liberty so strongly emphasized by the American Revolution. Enslavement also rendered the thousands of Muslims in early America invisible to our popular consciousness of America's origins.

The second week of background readings introduced key primary sources that helped students to see Omar as a theologian, which was his life's work and vocation before he was enslaved and taken to the United States. Students closely examined two of Omar's letters: his earliest known writing from 1819,¹⁵ and his 1853 letter.¹⁶ The first letter dwells intensely on God's power over all human beings, God's justice and eventual victory over oppressors, and God's being the one true source of goodness in the world. The 1853 letter was written after Omar's apparent conversion to Christianity in 1820, but exhibits the complexity of his relationship with Christianity. This letter includes both Qur'anic chapters and Biblical quotations (from Psalm 123), and it is structured with clear Islamic theological language and themes, most notably God's omnipotence. Because Omar was therefore clearly using both Islamic and Christian prayers and theological meditations some 30 years after his supposed conversion, this complex text invited students to meditate on Omar's relationship with religion itself, especially in the context of his subjugation.

Moreover, the 1853 letter includes a possible unattributed quotation from an elementary didactic Muslim creed from the tenth century, which Omar almost certainly would have studied in his homeland (the 'aqida of ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī, d.996). This quotation¹⁷ used by Omar in his letter stresses belief in God's omnipotence, further emphasizing how Omar's theological training in Senegambia continued to serve as his frame of reference during the extraordinary hardships that he endured in the United States.¹⁸ Students studied an English translation of this tenth-century document (a document that Omar probably read many times in the course of his own studies) in

¹⁵ Alryyes, *A Muslim American Slave*, 195-201.

¹⁶ Omar ibn Said, *Letter to John Taylor* (Spartanburg County Historical Association, 1853). Accessed February 13, 2021, <https://www.niu.edu/arabic-slave-writings/spartanburg-manuscript/index.shtml>.

¹⁷ The quote asserts the need for "belief in God's total omnipotence and determination of all events [*qadar*], its good and its evil [*al-imān bil qadar khayrihi wa sharrihi*]." In other words, this quotation refers to the Sunni Muslim theological assertion that all events come from God's specific and planned determination, regardless of whether we perceive these events as being good or evil from our limited human perspective.

¹⁸ Ibn Said, *Letter to John Taylor*, page left, line 6-8.

order to connect with Omar on his own intellectual terms: as a theologian struggling to understand the enormously difficult circumstances of his life.¹⁹ The final discussions of these two weeks of background reading helped the students to develop a firm grounding in the sources needed to develop their own projects, while at the same time helping them to find ways to connect with Omar as a religious scholar and thinker of note.

Making the Work Interdisciplinary

In week three we focused on exploring the interdisciplinary nature of this project and connecting Omar's life and background to the Spoleto opera. Laila Hussein Moustafa outlines the importance of taking an interdisciplinary approach when teaching challenging subjects. In her chapter "Interdisciplinary Education for Teaching Challenging Subjects: The Case of Islam and Violence," she outlines how a team-teaching approach that "brings together insights from distance fields of study, which can offer radical new contributions to creating solutions to difficult problems facing society. In some cases, an interdisciplinary approach may even lead to the development of new disciplines."²⁰ Edward Curtis's text *Muslims in America* (2009) provided the background material that participating students and professors needed to put Omar ibn Said's life into context with the historical legacy of Islam and Muslims in the United States. Because the book's coverage extends until shortly after 9/11, we engaged in discussions of the experience and place of Muslims today in the United States, in the post-ISIS and current Black Lives Matter political moments.

Interdisciplinary education "is a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single disciplinary approaches."²¹ Our problem to solve and our question to answer was this: How much more can we find out about Omar and others like him, i.e., slaves from West Africa who wrote Arabic and had learned the practice of Islam? If the administrators of Spoleto Festival USA in the years before 2020 decided this question was compelling enough to commission an opera to answer it, then why would it not be enough for us? As part of this research project we were going to study the artists' process in recreating Omar's story. Omar's story was coming to the world as opera, so we would now learn about opera. Omar composer and librettist Rhiannon Giddens says that for her,

Trying to investigate early African-American music of which there is no recordings, plenty of biased observations by European observers, some instruments, some illustrations, ephemeral things you have to immerse yourself in – ultimately it's always gonna be a guess. This is not Omar,

¹⁹ "The 'aqīda of Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī," in W. Montgomery Watt, ed., *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 69-71.

²⁰ Laila Hussein Moustafa, "Interdisciplinary Education for Teaching Challenging Subjects: The Case of Islam and Violence," in Courtney Dorroll, ed., *Teaching Islamic Studies in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 95-108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

this is our representation of Omar, and then there's all this knowledge about slavery. It's so limited, it's so shallow, so I just had to pick the route that came open to me as I read his words over and over again, and let that lead me. It is *an* Omar, well, freedom. It's been a highly spiritual experience.²²

Rhiannon Giddens (a woman of color whose mother is black and father is white) is in many ways an embodiment of interdisciplinary work and study. She classically trained as an opera singer at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, learned banjo when she and two fellow musicians “made the commitment to travel to Mebane, North Carolina, every Thursday night to sit in the home of old-time fiddler Joe Thompson for a musical jam session,”²³ founded the country, blues, and old-time music band Carolina Chocolate Drops, winning a Grammy in 2011, received a MacArthur genius grant for “enriching our understanding of American music by reclaiming African American contributions” and “revealing affinities between a range of musical traditions, from gospel and Celtic to jazz and R&B,”²⁴ and now written the score and libretto for an opera. It was not just her wide variety of musical experiences that made her an excellent candidate to bring Omar to the stage, however; Giddens has “made a name for herself excavating unsung historical black narratives and turning them into folk ballads – purposeful work that has placed her on countless stages and resulted in a long list of accolades.”²⁵ After several performances at Spoleto, Nigel Reden senses her trajectory as a first-rate musical and poetic artist. He catches the comet by the tail and proves that Omar, Giddens, BLM, Charleston, and art are destined to work together in the finest liberal arts tradition and benefit humanity with their story. In validation, Spoleto's Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities, John Kennedy, says by way of introduction to the YouTube program referenced above that “an aspect of storytelling. . . of excavating and prioritizing certain kinds of stories that need to be told and using your practice as an artist to tell stories that you believe in, for a Festival based in Charleston, South Carolina, a city that is at the nexus of America's original sin.”²⁶

Public Outreach Writing Products

In weeks four and five, students read books on how to write good public relations (PR) pieces, with a focus on the elements and construction of strong public outreach pieces. Students read from *The PR Style Guide* by Barbara Diggs-Brown and met and discussed public outreach writing with members of the campus Office of Marketing and Communications.

²² Spoleto Festival USA, “Exploring Omar: Complex Identities in the Arts,” YouTube Video, 26:48, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1ALEqo1Aqs>.

²³ Spoleto Festival USA, *2020 Spoleto Festival USA Ticket Brochure*, 102, https://issuu.com/sfusa2014/docs/spoleto_ticketbrochure_2020_final.

²⁴ MacArthur Foundation, “Rhiannon Giddens,” Class of 2017, macfound.org/fellows/class-of-2017/rhiannon-giddens.

²⁵ Spoleto Festival USA, *2020 Spoleto Festival USA Ticket Brochure*.

²⁶ Spoleto Festival USA, “Exploring Omar,” YouTube Video.

One student produced a brochure on a letter written by Omar ibn Said that is housed in a local museum, the Spartanburg Regional History Museum. The museum now uses the brochure in their collection and gives it out to guests interested in the letter. The brochure was also circulated to area professors who might be interested in incorporating the letter and the brochure into their classes; the student-author generated a list of professors and sent the email out similarly to how a marketing professional would create “buzz” around a topic. Our other student focused her public outreach piece on describing the opera that is set to debut in summer 2021. In the final week, we held one-on-one faculty-and-student Zoom sessions and spent time copy-editing and polishing the pieces.

Suggestions on How to Do This at Your Institution

Making the Work Sustainable for You and Your Students

With this method of collaboration, it is vital to consider how students and faculty will be compensated for their work. Will it be through a summer research grant? Will it be embedded in a course, where the work and research contribute to the student’s grade and form part of the professor’s normal teaching load? Will professors be allowed and/or able to co-teach? Is there a living learning community program that would allow a more in-depth, co-taught experience around the topic? Are there external grants that can be procured to fund this type of work? Does your institution have a grants office or grants specialist who can help support you in finding such funds? It is important to investigate what sustainable ways this type of work can be done on one’s campus so that the research does not become unpaid labor.

In all of our work from the summer we wanted to honor the emotional labor involved in researching slave narratives and working to uncover silenced voices. In any work surrounding race, identity also matters: we are three white professors and the students are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or people of color). We named this dynamic outright and were honest along the way about the energy, emotion, privilege, and power dynamics embedded in doing research of this kind, especially when being done amid a global pandemic. We added in self-care time (in the paid 30 hours) so students could regroup, recenter, and rejuvenate during this research project. Specifically, students were asked to use the Resilience Project Toolkit’s²⁷ wellbeing activities during their paid time to focus on their mental health and unwind (one activity per week). We also encouraged students to take a paid lunch break and add in various 15-minute breaks during each work day. The goal was to create sustainable work weeks for the students and professors alike.

Agency

Our biggest piece of advice it to give students agency to choose what they will produce. We gave the basic structure of needing to do a public outreach piece

²⁷ Wofford, “The Resilience Project,” <https://www.wofford.edu/Wofford.edu/Documents/About/resilience-project/toolkit.pdf>.

but allowed each student to come up with what specific product they would want to produce.

Given that experiences of severe trauma lay at the heart of the entirety of Omar's life in the United States, we did not prescribe any particular way that the students should feel about Omar's life or writings. Instead, we tried to shape our role as a provider of historical detail and context, and then leave the act of interpreting the specific significance of Omar's writings up to the students themselves. This is how we deal with any academic subject matters that involve trauma in a classroom setting as well: our role as the instructor is to provide information and context that the students may not otherwise be able to access themselves, but then step aside and provide the students a space where they can interpret the significance of these events in their own terms.

We introduced the students to Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels as artists of color doing relatable work in both the current music scene and award-winning feature films (Carolina Chocolate Drops and Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and *Us*, respectively). We believe that the pop cultural appeal motivated the students with regard to doing their research work on the composers of the *Omar* opera. They were completely self-guided.

We also found allowing each professor agency to create structure around a segment of the summer to work well. Each professor was tasked with adding information about their specific discipline, but other than that each professor had autonomy to select the readings and activities during their week. This gives equal weight to all disciplines and professors involved. If this had been a classroom setting, we would recommend dividing up the weeks for each discipline being covered to apportion equal weight and adding in time in the syllabus to work on the project and peer-review and edit the project. We would also recommend adding in work days and library days in combination with encouraging students to peer review and/or work with your institution's writing centers. With summer research at our institution the professors choose students to work with; if you are doing a class that requires previous knowledge on a subject, consider making the class an upper-level course with a pre-requisite. For our situation, we would make the class a 300-level course but require that students had at least one of the following classes before enrolling: Intro Islam, beginning Arabic, and/or introduction to theater.

Expand Who Is Considered the "Expert"

Student-faculty research gives students agency to do more independent research while also providing guidance and support from their faculty collaborators. This type of work also repositions who is allowed to speak and write about Islam within the academy, instead of limiting such roles to professors only. The public outreach project was a manageable goal for undergraduates to accomplish in a single semester or summer. Public outreach is a style of writing that allows students to engage the wider public and puts them in the position of an expert.

It is also helpful to consider contacting other subject-matter experts who are on and off campus to help with editing the work and providing feedback. Have campus librarians help students with finding background sources. Set up a presentation or one-on-one meeting where students can get advice from senior Marketing and Communication staff members on your campus. Contact local newspapers to see if a reporter will also discuss with the students the practice of writing for the public. Invite someone from the campus Career Center to discuss how students can highlight this type of work on their resumes and in future job interviews or graduate school applications. Expand the scope of the resources made available to your class to include the broader campus and local community. Doing this will allow the students to see their project as an undertaking with “real world” significance. It is even better if you can help students find avenues to publish their final public outreach products, e.g., in a campus or local newspaper, blogs, or on the school’s website.

Conclusion

“The nexus of America’s original sin,” referring to Charleston, South Carolina, is a powerful image. In May 2020, as our research began, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed by Minneapolis police and the Black Lives Matter movement swiftly reemerged across the country. One of our research students found fuel for her project from this remarkable parallel between two black men, two centuries apart, criminally pushed to the bottom of America’s caste system because of the color of their skin, yet whose names have been raised to great heights by America’s ongoing dream of liberty and justice for all. Our student-researcher found in herself a voice not unlike Rhiannon Giddens’ to tell these stories, to find others like them, and to learn the names and stories of the silenced. We would never have guessed our student researcher would arrive at this very topical outcome with her final project, but we feel confident that she would not have without an interdisciplinary approach, which allowed her to weave together the study of Islam, Muslims in America, slavery, opera, the Spoleto Festival, Charleston, Rhiannon Giddens, Senegambia West Africa, Omar ibn Said, and Black Lives Matter. In this way, our students became our teachers, demonstrating how a solid foundation in interdisciplinary research can bring students to new, unexpected, and fruitful lines of inquiry. Interdisciplinarity is required for tackling complex social problems such as structural oppression and injustice. Because structural problems are by their nature implicated in a wide variety of institutions and social phenomena, input from specialists in many different fields is necessary for addressing structural inequality.

This method of bringing faculty and students together around a singular research project in an interdisciplinary fashion could also be done during the schoolyear with course-embedded research in a team-teaching type of classroom model. The public-outreach products could be done in groups as a final project for the team-taught course, with the background research part of the scaffolded, iterative process. It is important that professors explore what kind of support one would have at his or her institution for

interdisciplinary team-teaching and course-embedded research. If one is linking professors from different institutions, check what types of grants might be available to fund such work. For example, if a school has grant money to help support bringing outside speakers to campus, one can apply for the partner-professor to come to campus to do a public talk, and, during the visit, one could build in sessions where that professor could meet and mentor the students doing the collaborative, interdisciplinary research. Additionally, any class with a heavy research component would benefit from including a librarian in the planning process, as the library may have unique resources that support the course; the librarian can also serve as a resource for students as they engage in independent research.

As a concluding point, this idea of student-faculty collaborative research would be wonderful if done in the semester in a team-teaching model. If one were interested specifically in a course on Muslims in contemporary America, here are some other books that would be great supplementary texts: *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* by Todd Green; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley*; *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* by Su'ad Abdul Khabeer; *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* by Moustafa Bayomi; and *Muslim American Women on Campus* by Shabana Mir. If a professor is looking for a short introductory text on Islam, we would suggest *Islam: An Introduction* by Annemarie Schimmel. For discussions of power and privilege in archives, we recommend Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*. To put this type of project and approach into context with other ways of teaching Islam, we recommend Brannon Wheeler's edited volume *Teaching Islam*, Courtney Dorroll's edited volume *Teaching Islam in the Age of ISIS, Islamophobia, and the Internet*, and the Wabash Center's blog on *Teaching Islam*.

Recognizing the varied roles of Muslims in America and telling the history of early Muslim slaves who have been systematically erased from our collective memories and official histories is key to our understanding of American history. It will take collaborative work from many different disciplines and modes of writing to bring this important topic to light. This is one example of an interdisciplinary project that addresses these issues, but there are many other interesting collaborations with students and faculty that bring together local expertise. Through projects like this one, we can address this understudied topic and work to better represent it in the American academic canon and in the official narratives of who we are and who we remember.