

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Team-teaching as Feminist Praxis at a Small Liberal Arts College

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One of the benefits of working at a liberal arts college is that we can be innovative in our course design and use courses as laboratories for engaging with new scholarship, testing pedagogy, and even working through research ideas. One of the challenges, however, is that it can be difficult to find intellectual community at a small institution. When Lafayette College announced an educational initiative to foster interdisciplinary cooperation and the discussion of “big ideas” via team-teaching, we were very excited to apply. Rachel is a historian who works on urban confraternities and inter-faith interactions in medieval Anatolia while Neha is an anthropologist who focuses on migration, citizenship, and higher education in the Arabian Peninsula. As two of the college’s only scholars whose work revolves around the Middle East, we hoped to use this initiative to create new learning environments for students.

We have both perceived an uptick over the last two years in Islamophobia and racism on our campus. Therefore, we knew that we wanted the course we designed to center on gender and Islam. As feminist scholars, we also wanted to provide students with a model of female intellectual exchange that offered not only anthropological and historical approaches to a set of intellectual questions, but also showed students how an understanding of history can be improved by anthropology and vice versa. We proposed a course called “Muslim Girls (Run the World): Gender and Popular Culture from Prophetic Tradition to Arab Futurism,” to be taught during spring semester 2018. Ultimately, the goal of this course was to shed light on how much popular culture has shaped notions of gendered identities over time and across various locations of the “Islamic World.” Beyond this, our course sought to show that pop culture and its global reach is not a uniquely modern phenomenon, even if the production, circulation, and consumption of culture and media have intensified in today’s world. This course was unique in its focus on medieval, modern, and contemporary

forms of popular culture as they spread (and spread Islam) around various parts of the globe. In a particularly fraught political time when ideas about what constitutes Islam, Islamic history, and Muslim “culture” are circulating as hardened objects, we wanted to provide opportunities for students to engage, in the best spirit of a liberal arts education, with the contingencies and contradictions that have shaped the everyday lives and representational practices of those who loosely fall under this vast religious, legal, and social umbrella. We also wanted to incorporate multiple opportunities the college itself provided for undergraduate research and learning experiences.

Our proposal included a brief list of topics including oral transmission, devotional art, saintly sites, poetry, cross-dressing, various film genres, headscarf fashion, hip hop, and a range of other forms of popular culture that have often times been associated with women, lower classes, the abject, and some that have even been considered “un-Islamic.” In order to draft this proposed set of topics, we drew from our own fields as well as women’s and gender studies, film and media studies, art history, ethnic studies, queer theory, and Islamic studies.

In an effort to get students to begin the course with an open mind, we assigned them as prerequisite reading the G. Willow Wilson fantasy novel *Alif the Unseen* (Grove: 2012) and had them write an alternative ending to the book. This approach provided an excellent jumping off point for the wide range of students who enrolled: some were women’s and gender studies majors, some were engineers, some had intimate personal experiences with Islam, and some had little to no knowledge about anything Islamic. Reading such a futuristic account of young characters engaging simultaneously with *djinn* (genies) and the hacking underworld provided a fun but rich introduction to themes that were central to our course, such as race and ethnicity, gender roles and women’s agency, popular culture, social media as a tool for political dissent, and the question of who decides what is “Islamic.”

As the semester began, we quickly realized that it was impossible to teach this class in the same way we had taught other courses. There was simply too much material for this to be a survey of any kind. Instead, we organized a weekly 3-hour period as a layered approach to one topic, asking students to make connections across time periods and locations while also engaging them each week in close readings of theoretical approaches to Islam, gender, and ways to problematize notions of culture and the past. Another challenge we encountered was teaching such a diverse group of students, many of whom had never taken a course on anything related to Islam or gender. For example, most students had never read *Orientalism* (Pantheon:

1978) and were unfamiliar with the large body of work related to post-colonialism and the intellectual conversations that stem from Edward Said's intervention. Once we became aware of the relative imbalance in the classroom, we began making additional readings available via our Moodle site and assigning excerpts or reviews of significant readings in-class to encourage discussion so that students could find their way through the literature and participate more profoundly in classroom conversations. Still, this meant that many students had catch-up work to do in order to be able to fully understand and contextualize the curriculum; it is for this reason that in the course's future iterations, we plan to institute a prerequisite and incorporate more readings that engage foundational postcolonial and transnational feminist texts.

In one of our earliest exercises, students read excerpts of Denise Spellberg's *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past* (Columbia University Press: 1995). Spellberg discusses how male Muslim scholars engaged in political and sectarian debate via discussions and interpretations of the life of the Prophet Muhammad's youngest wife, 'A'isha. In order to engage students in the process of argument formation based on texts, we conducted an in-class *hadith* (transmitted sayings and deeds of the Prophet and his companions) exercise, asking students in groups if they could summarize *hadith* from the collection of Bukhari that dealt with topics related to women, clothing, and sex. The consensus (no pun intended!) was that the *hadith* offered contradictory approaches to each of the topics they considered. This reading and exercise forced students to reconsider the significance of women in shaping identity in the early Islamic world (and pre-modern period, in general), the verifiability of orally transmitted texts as compared with written texts, and the importance of interpretation in using the *hadith*, both in the past and in contemporary contexts.

We incorporated current events as much as we could into the course material. As our semester was starting a controversial Bollywood film, *Padmaavat*, opened at the box office. A fictional representation of medieval India, the film allowed us to discuss how Hindu nationalists lay claim to the past (and to women's sexuality) in order to produce particular narratives about the nation. This is an example of how we brought both of our fields of expertise to bear on one topic – women and the nation. Neha was able to speak to the South Asian context and introduce students to postcolonial theory from the subcontinent, and Rachel was able to place this case in a comparative context as one of many where the medieval is reconstructed in the interest of specific political projects, whether nationalist or Islamic.

The timing of our course was particularly auspicious as it coincided with the college's having acquired a grant from the Doris Duke Foundation's [Building Bridges program](#) to share and promote contemporary art from the Islamic World. This allowed us to coordinate a gallery visit with Moroccan artist [Lalla Essaydi](#), whose work was being shown at the college's Williams Center for the Arts, and to invite a guest lecture by [Laila Lalami](#), author of the book *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* (Workman: 2005), which had been selected as our community read for the academic year.

Our semester culminated in a class trip to New York City, where Lafayette hosts a classroom space. Students visited the Galleries for the Art of the Arab Lands, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and Later South Asia at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and chose an item that they could link to the production of popular culture in the Islamic world and to women's roles therein. They then offered short presentations on their object and how it related to some of the themes of our course.

Over the semester, we built intellectual spaces – in our classroom, with one another, and with colleagues across campus who were intrigued by our project. We greatly enjoyed teaching this class – in particular, at a liberal arts college – because it seemed to have many scholarly and social reverberations beyond our classroom. Our students were able to gain a brief glimpse into the heterogeneity of Muslim pasts, presents, and even futures (through sci-fi films and comic books). We feel particularly pleased to have taught a course about Islam that focused on women, gender, and sexuality in Islam, and hope that it will lead us, and others, down new intellectual paths that engage deeply with the place of women and non-binary subjects in producing and performing Islam. Without the dedication to educational experience prized by the academics and administrators that work at Lafayette College, we would not have been able to fund such a course or try the teaching techniques that we did. We would like to thank Jamila Bookwala, Erica D'Agostino, Michiko Okaya, Mary Armstrong, and our department heads, Josh Sanborn and Andrea Smith, for their encouragement and support.

SELECTED READINGS

1. Attiya Ahmad, *Everyday Conversions: Islam, Domestic Work, and South Asian Migrant Women in Kuwait* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
2. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

3. Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (May 2009).
4. Sherine Hamdy, *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
5. Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion and Hip Hop* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).
6. Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005).
7. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
8. Sa'diyah Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
9. D.A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender and the Islamic Past: the Legacy of A'isha Bint Abi Bakr* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 1995).
10. G. Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen* (New York City: Grove Press, 2013).

SELECTED FILM SCREENINGS:

1. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour: 2014)
2. *Champ of the Camp* (Mahmoud Kaabour: 2013)
3. *Hajwalah* (Rana Jarbou: 2015)
4. *Head-On* (Fatih Akin: 2004)
5. *Hosay Trinidad* (John Bishop: 1999)
6. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears: 1985)