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CONVERSATION

All Choice is Political: A Conversation with Shawkat M. Toorawa

Shawkat M. Toorawa

Yale University

Maria E. Doerfler

Yale University

ABSTRACT

This interview with Shawkat M. Toorawa, Professor of Arabic Literature and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University was recorded, transcribed, and edited for publication. The conversation addresses such topics as: the political positionality of expertise and often essentialized identity as a Muslim or person of color, the “balancing act” scholars who are Muslim face between, on the one hand, the study of Arabic literature as a literary tradition, and on the other, Islam as a lived or even theoretical religion, and problems of the canon, “classics,” Arabic literature, and the category of “world literature.”

KEYWORDS

Islam, Arabic literature, 9/11, bodies and pedagogy, Qur’an, violence, religion

Maria
Doerfler

Thanks for making time to talk with me about politics and pedagogy, Shawkat. I’ve learned so much from you over the past couple of years, and look forward to learning more today. To start out, I want to go back to your very early pedagogical experience—the time that you spent teaching at Duke—because you recently wrote a very moving reflection on developing identity as a scholar and teacher (Toorawa 2012). I want to just very briefly read you a couple of sentences that make me laugh because I think they’re an incredibly relatable experience for anybody who teaches premodernity:

In 1990, in my second year teaching Arabic at Duke University, I received a call from a Durham newspaper asking me for my “expert” opinion on Operation Desert Storm. I curtly asked the reporter whether the newspaper had contacted the English department when the Falklands Crisis erupted.

This really resonated with me, in part because I think everybody in academia has at some point been on the receiving end of those kinds of questions. I wonder, however, if in the years since then you’ve had more such encounters with people wanting to make you into an expert on contemporary political developments, and if your response has changed.

Shawkat
Toorawa

As you know from having read the piece (Toorawa 2012), it deals with the balancing act scholars who are Muslim face between, on the one hand, the study of Arabic literature as a literary tradition, and on the other, Islam as a lived or even theoretical religion. I’ve spent a lot of time separating these two categories, and

there are all kinds of ways in which I continue to separate them even as I also appear to be undermining that separation. That's a source of some frustration: you spend a lot of time trying to get people not to think of you [as a Muslim] in your pedagogical capacity, and then you yourself do things that encourage people to think of you that way. This makes it tricky.

For example, I've co-edited a book on the Hajj (Tagliacozzo and Toorawa 2016) and a primer on Islam (Allen and Toorawa 2011), two projects of which I'm very proud. My co-editors invited my involvement in part because of my "Islam credentials," but the latter is a function not of my being Muslim, but of my being well trained academically—I had the good fortune to be in a department where my teachers didn't believe that you should train only in your area of specialization, so I got medieval Islamic institutions, medieval European history, and Byzantine history, in addition to Arabic literature, because they are all connected. And yet, after finishing co-editing (with Eric Tagliacozzo) the book on the Hajj, I got a phone call from a reporter about an American Muslim woman's piece for the *New York Times* about her performing the Hajj, and I was asked to comment. I said, "I'm sorry I don't answer these questions. I can give you the names of people who are experts on contemporary Muslim religious experience, but that's not the nature of my work beyond what I covered in the book."

So, I do still try to separate the academic and the experiential—there tends to be an assumption that one's religious identity makes one an expert on topics related to that religion, which is really a form of essentializing discourse. Of course, there are always exceptions: 9/11, for example.

Pedagogy in the Context of International Crisis

Maria
Doerfler Can you expand on that a little?

Shawkat
Toorawa When 9/11 happened, I had recently returned to the United States. I had been peripatetic: moving from the U.S. to Egypt, back to Duke, and then to Mauritius. I was at Harvard in 1999-2000, working on a project about race and identity in Mauritius, and found myself at Cornell the following year. I remember my chair, Ross Brann, turning to me when we heard the news. He said "This sets our field back fifty years." It turns out he would be proven wrong—but he was wrong because we all responded the right way, for fear that it would set back the field fifty years.

Cornell was deeply affected by the events of 9/11: it is a state university of New York; the Cornell Medical Center in New York City was one of the trauma centers; twenty-one people with Cornell connections died we later learned; I could go on. So, we did a lot of things for a year, teaching. I was part of the university teach-ins, along with the president and Ted Lowi, Cornell's senior American historian, as the token Muslim faculty member.

Maria
Doerfler Can you talk a little bit about those teach-ins? What did those look like?

Shawkat
Toorawa They looked like white people and me.

Maria
Doerfler Go on.

Shawkat
Toorawa I got difficult questions from the students—many of them good, or at least important. One student said to me "What do you think was going on in the minds of hijackers?" and I said, "If I were a deranged hijacker, I might tell you what it's like. I have no idea what it's like to be a deranged hijacker." And then I said to the young woman: "You know, I don't have a problem with you asking that question, but we need to think about why you came up with it, and why you think I might be the one on this panel to answer it." She might have asked: "Has anyone ever been in a hijacking, or ever studied hijackers, and do any of you have any insight on why someone might want to do something like this?" Why assume that the one brown member of the

panel would know? I told her that I also have to explain this to my four- and six-year-old daughters, never mind to eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. I remember our younger daughter coming home one day soon after and asking me just completely innocently and plaintively: “Is there such a thing as a bad Muslim?” And I had to explain to her that there are bad people of all kinds.

One of the locations for our teach-ins was the Ithaca high school. Some students had received death threats, so the high school had shut down for half a day, and the Department of Near Eastern Studies did a teach-in there. That was a really interesting experience, because it seemed to me there were proportionally many more students engaged in the conversations than there had been at Cornell. Many of the students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, came up to us after the teach-in to talk about different aspects. Many students came up to us and said: “Thank you for this [teach-in] because we’re outraged, but we don’t have the language or the background to respond to the kind of hate that we hear from our understandably ignorant friends. You’ve given us information and ways of responding.” I thought the teach-ins were, in fact, much more successful at the high school than they had been at the university. I think part of the reason for that was a kind of naivety among high schoolers that was slowly eroding at college.

In the years since, I’ve tried to steer clear of anything involving having to explain Islam or Muslims to anyone other than in the classroom. I took a call from PBS once when there was a flare-up in Mauritius. A colleague who used to teach at the University of Connecticut had told them that I might have some insight. I took that call because the questions they posed had nothing to do with Islam.

Bodies, Books, and Politics

Maria Doerfler Sometimes politics comes for us, as in the case of 9/11 and its aftermath, and I imagine a few other incidents in recent years that we might talk about here. One of the things that you’ve noted in the context of your conversation with the Cornell undergraduate who asked about the mind of the hijackers, is something that I think you and I have touched upon in previous conversations: that in some ways we bring politics into the classroom by virtue of our bodies. Many of the contributors to this special issue are not persons of color and are speaking out of their research, of course, but also out of their experience as young, mostly white men and women. Do you want to talk a little bit about your own experience as a brown person in the classroom?

Shawkat Toorawa Let me say a few things which will, I suppose, connect in the end. One of the things that I realized early in my career is that when I’m in Europe I know I’m brown or bearded, and when I’m in the U.S. I often have no consciousness of it. When I’m walking around the streets of New York or New Haven, my brown body might signal to African Americans, for example. The other day a man addressed me as “brother” and, while I may be mistaken, I cannot imagine he would have done that if I were white. I was with my daughter and I said to her: “Brown people basically pass on both sides.” Those moments are interesting but I do feel my brownness far less here [in the Northeast] than in Europe. When I walked into the classroom at Yale my first day I didn’t do so, thinking: “Oh, people think of me as brown,” which is not to say that I try to erase [my ethnic identity]. Much depends on context and perceptions: in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, for example, someone asked me if I was Jewish, based on my appearance.

Maria Doerfler That must have been either a very open-minded or slightly confused person.

Shawkat Toorawa The latter, I think. All that’s to say: when I taught an undergraduate lecture course on the Qur’an at Cornell, I was acutely aware of the students’ perception of my appearance. I was scheduled to teach that course for the first time in spring 2002, the semester after 9/11. These two events were unrelated; my department had made the decision to offer that course in April of the preceding year. Not surprisingly, the class attracted quite a high number of Muslims and quite a high number of brown people, many more than in other Near Eastern Studies classes.

As a result, there were new burdens on me because, as I soon discovered, a number of Muslim students expected me to toe some kind of a party line, even if they didn't know what that party line was: they felt that I needed to fly the flag or champion their faith. By contrast, a number of the non-Muslim students were suspicious of my veracity. That's when I was made very aware of my Muslim-ness, and my male Muslim-ness, as many of the topics that came up in the course had to do with gender, gender relations, or gender equality. Plus, of course, given that Islam is a pre-modern tradition, for the first 70 to 80 percent of the course everything we read was authored by men. That emphasizes the importance of foregrounding women's voices in secondary scholarship and being intentional in my choice of primary sources as soon as the option of including women authors arises.

In response, I developed a number of pedagogical strategies: I told the class that I would be treating the text, the Qur'an, the way I would treat *Hamlet*. I would do things like take a copy of the translated Qur'an and drop it to the ground. I explained to the class early on the need for respecting the fact that some people in the class might or might not believe that this is the Word of God, but that [at Cornell] we were in university, not a seminary. It's not that *this* book isn't sacred—it's that all books are sacred and that we should have the same reaction to dropping a book on the ground whether it's *Hamlet* or whether it's the Qur'an. That we should treat them all with reverence just as the university does. In short, I did something I've never had to do when teaching non-religious texts perceived to be of the same tradition as I am: I explained my subject position vis-à-vis the course material.

Earlier in my career, when teaching a class on Islamic civilizations at Duke, one of my students, maybe two or three weeks into the class, asked me: "Are you a Muslim?" My answer then was: "You tell me at the end of the class whether you think I'm Muslim."

Maria Doerfler That's an interesting response. I teach plenty of courses that engage some degree of political positionality. But my students by and large are not interested in where I stand politically—and that may be because they are drawing certain inferences on the basis that I'm a white, reasonably highly educated immigrant woman. But for the most part they really want to know what my religion is.

Shawkat Toorawa Right. I wouldn't have a problem with [sharing that information with students] any more than when they want to know where you went to high school or got your degree, except that it leads to a view about your reliability which isn't implicated in the same way by other kinds of information about a faculty member. I think the idea is that if you're teaching Buddhism and you're Buddhist — that's good. If you're teaching Judaism and you're a rabbi—that's good. But I suspect that if you're teaching Mormonism and you're a Mormon, that's bad, or if you're teaching Islam, or any religious movement that is less well understood—say, a Jehovah's Witness teaching new American religious movements—students are likely to be skeptical about you. To be brutally honest, I get it. If a Mullah is teaching Shiism, [under the rationale that more expertise is better], the student response, in theory, ought to be: "Wow, an absolute expert!" But that tends not to be the reaction, and this, too, of course, has to do with politics and their pervasive influence on the classroom. But it is a burden.

Maria Doerfler Does that lie at the root of the suspicion you encountered from students when teaching the Qur'an?

Shawkat Toorawa Yes, definitely. One of the things I say to students [in these kinds of courses] is: "Think about the Qur'an as an orange. Imagine you've never seen an orange before in your life. All you can really say about it after having held it is that it's orange and that it's spherical. If you've seen other oranges you realize that they are all that way. But if you really want to know about the orange you have to put a knife to it and cut it open, you have to squeeze it—and that's what we're going to do to the Qur'an." This is not doing violence to the orange—rather, it helps you to learn how better to interact with the orange.

One of my main objectives in the course is to have students see that Muslims have said valuable things about the Qur'an and also stupid things about the Qur'an and that non-Muslims have said valuable things

Shawkat Toorawa about the Qur'an and stupid things about the Qur'an. It's not about whether the scholar is Muslim or non-Muslim. Then students get to decide whether they believe that, and obviously not all do.

Politics in Classroom and Curriculum

Maria Doerfler So, you obviously are a pre-modernist. . .

Shawkat Toorawa . . .and a modernist.

Maria Doerfler You're jack-of-all-trades. When you teach pre-modern subjects do you find that you either purposefully seek to bring politics—broadly conceived, conversations about gender, race, or ethnic identity, et cetera—into the classroom, or do they find a way to nudge in despite your not inviting that?

Shawkat Toorawa I actually actively do bring [these topics] in, knowing that they will come up anyway—and if by some miracle they don't come up, then I will be the one to raise them. You cannot as a responsible pedagogue avoid talking about certain things. I think for example, teaching the Qur'an you can't *not* include a conversation on jihad and violence, but there isn't a "violence week" [on my syllabus], although some of my colleagues do include one, of course. Rather, these are topics that need to be treated organically as part of the tradition throughout the course.

Maria Doerfler That's interesting to me because courses on sacred texts from other traditions could certainly have their own equivalent "violence week," but to the very best of my knowledge they do not.

Shawkat Toorawa Absolutely. Of course, for the longest time the "Judaism/Christianity/Islam" course at Cornell was taught by Ross Brann as "Holy War/Crusade/Jihad," as a way to subvert these kinds of assumptions. It attracted a lot of students, and he then expended the whole class undermining that paradigm, which is really quite a clever pedagogical move. But anyhow: I choose texts carefully. I'm a literature person, and with literature, everything inevitably comes up. It [would be like] watching *Game of Thrones* and avoiding talking about violence! In fact, I tend to pick stuff that has all the hot-button topics in it, but I aspire to complicate them for students.

For example, one of the texts I like to read with the students is the description of Egypt by 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, written in the late 1100s—his depiction of Cairo, the vegetables, the pyramids, the plague, the famine, and stories that he hears about cannibalism. He's brilliant: chief physician of Baghdad, a polymath. He's multilingual, meets Maimonides—just an amazing guy, and his account provides opportunities for all kinds of conversations with students. But one of my students recently said to me: "I never knew people like him existed." Of course he knew they existed! He's heard of Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, and Ben Johnson, but he had no notion that people like this could exist anywhere else in the world—in Islamic or African culture, say. So helping students realize and reflect on their own blindspots and misconceptions by introducing them to the texts and artifacts of groups that lie beyond their field of vision, personal experience, or expectations about different cultures: that's really my pedagogy.

It is actually encapsulated by something a colleague at Duke said in a class I created, "Introduction to Asian and African Languages and Literatures." All five of us who co-taught that class gave a two-minute subject position at the beginning of the semester: this is who I am and this what do I do. He said, "I'm here supposedly representing the literatures of South Asia, but all I really want you to get out of this class is to understand that human beings everywhere at all times are just as complicated as you." I do something like that in my classes now too: for example, when I talk about Medieval Baghdad, I say: "Look this is an ascendant civilization, it's like New York today, and the difference between them and us is one thing only: technology. They have the same aspirations, the same hang-ups, the same murderous tendencies, the same amorous tendencies; we have cellphones and they didn't."

It is in this context, too, that religion comes up in my classes. One of my “finest hours” was the first time I ever taught a sophomore seminar on Medieval Baghdad at Cornell. It was a writing class, and the major assignment I set for it was writing content for a website. At one point we were designing the architecture of the website and writing all the categories for it. The students came up with a number of categories—the Caliph, food, all kinds of stuff—and in the end I asked them: “Isn’t there something missing?” They didn’t know what I was talking about, and I pointed out that we did not yet have religion as a category. And the students all looked at each other like: “*That* should be a category?!” I thought I should just retire. If you don’t think religion is a category when thinking about Medieval Baghdad that’s fantastic, because, of course, religion is implicated in all the other categories without being a stand-alone monolith. But, of course, in the end I convinced them that it should get its own category anyway, in large part because of the many other religions in medieval Baghdad: Christianity, Judaism, and so on.

Maria
Doerfler I appreciate your investing in my field.

Shawkat
Toorawa That exchange convinced me that maybe I’m picking the right kinds of texts when I’m teaching. In the same way, I’m not ignoring politics, rather they are implicated in everything and come up to the extent that they can come up.

Maria
Doerfler So being intentional about text selection is a starting point.

Shawkat
Toorawa That is key. The readings you choose ought to provoke and invite important conversations. I am involved in helping develop a first-year seminar as part of a new humanities initiative at Yale. The class is going to be called “Six Pretty Good Books,” and so I chose the *Shahnameh* as one of the books. It’s an epic poem, a kind of foundational Iranian text translated splendidly from Persian by Dick Davis that makes *Game of Thrones* look like a walk in the park. The students devour it when it’s assigned; the last time I taught it, I only assigned two hundred pages but they read nine hundred!

I said to the students: “Excluding Iranians, there are only this many [*holds up two fingers, an inch apart*] people in the world who have read this text, despite its being one of the most important things humanity has ever produced and being just a fantastic yarn. That alone should be a source of pride for you: you’ve now been exposed to something in college that you might not otherwise have encountered, whereas we’re all reading *Arabian Nights*.” Mind you, all Arabists teach the *Nights*—I teach it—and many of us use it as a pretext to introduce more important texts. But it’s a real shame that the only way to get students into the classroom is to have them read a text that is not canonical within the Arabic tradition, often pooh-pooed, not found on university or college syllabi in the Arab world, and is probably the most Orientalized, sexualized text we have, aside from the Kama Sutra. It has become a Western text: in the U.S., it is frequently the only Arabic text taught as part of “global” curricula—and that, of course, is also a deeply political decision.

Maria
Doerfler You’ve brought us in our conversation towards your “non-pedagogical” roles, your service in administrative and department leadership, and your involvement in crafting courses on a super-departmental level. When you’re mentoring faculty in your department, in conversation with junior faculty members, do you ever encounter anxieties or aspirations about addressing politics in the classroom?

Shawkat
Toorawa Yes, absolutely, but I think my take on this is that all faculty should teach what they want. I trust people to have good reasons for their pedagogical choices, even though I admittedly also think it’s naive to not pay attention to another kind of politics we encounter in the academy, namely those surrounding the numbers of students in the classroom. As a faculty member, you need to show your colleagues that you are having an impact. That doesn’t necessarily always lead to bad decisions: when I started teaching the *Arabian Nights* at Cornell, it was in order to get thirty-six people into the classroom rather than the nine who took my course on “Classics of the Arabic-Islamic World.” If a junior colleague asked me which of the two courses to teach, I would urge them to teach “Classics of the Arabic-Islamic World” first and try and build it. But

that may be a naive take on all this, and ultimately it is their decision that counts. In other words, I don't think junior colleges should think of themselves as "junior." I didn't. I wasn't treated as junior and I didn't act as junior, I acted like I was in charge of my own courses and my own advising—within the boundaries of departmental service and departmental requirements. We're all in charge of our own pedagogy and we're all colleagues.

The thing I and many of the faculty I advise are struggling with is the identity politics bandwagon.

Maria
Doerfler Do you want to expand on that?

Shawkat
Toorawa Let me put it this way: I am more interested in showing people the differences between traditions than in constantly looking for the commonalities while proselytizing common humanity. It seems to me that if I'm going to teach you a text in Arabic at a university, [I should do so] because it's just normal. It is completely reasonable for me to do that. I don't have to explain why I'm teaching you an Arabic text. It's not because I need to rehabilitate Arab culture. Now if I thereby do that, great, but there's this strange category of "world literature"—and as someone else said before me, it's only "world literature" to English speakers. It's not "global humanities" either: my colleagues and I are allergic to this concept. I'm actually thinking of proposing "Humanities for the Twenty-first Century," but even that is not great. That's how we came up with [the course title] "Six Pretty Good Books"—we didn't want the course to get caught up in arguments about "global" something or other.

All that's not to say that there isn't a place for Western classics [taught at] a Western university with a Western education system. After all, even the most downtrodden and oppressed members of our society are legatees of that tradition, and need to know it, even if only in order to be able to reject it. As scholars of premodernity know, the very people who studied premodernity and could quote it chapter and verse have been historically the most effective rejecters of tradition. At the University of Mauritius, I taught French literature and was instructed to start with the eighteenth century. The rationale was, "We do modern stuff now." I asked, "You're prepared to award a B.A. with Honors in French to students who have never even encountered *La Chanson de Roland*?"

All this hinges on the question of relevance, which is in its own right deeply political. Everything is relevant, of course, but you have to decide what you're going to pick [to teach]—and that is a political choice. We need to be aware that we're making political choices even in how faculty and institutions define "relevant": for example, as "relevant to the present moment," as opposed to "relevant for the present era."

Maria
Doerfler So, everything's relevant and everything is political.

Shawkat
Toorawa Yes, you knew that already: all choice is political and we are all forced to make choices.

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ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

Shawkat M. Toorawa serves as Professor of Arabic Literature and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University. He was born in London and raised in England, France, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and completed his higher education at the University of Pennsylvania. He has taught Arabic at Duke University, medieval French literature and Indian Ocean studies at the University of Mauritius, and Arabic and other literatures at Cornell University, where he received the James A. Perkins Prize for Interracial Understanding and Harmony. He joined the Yale faculty in 2016. An accomplished teacher and originator of [The dr T projecT](#), he teaches Arabic literature, medieval civilization, and science fiction whenever he can, as well as pedagogy workshops for faculty and graduate students at the Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning.

Maria E. Doerfler serves as Assistant Professor of Late Antiquity in the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University.