

Writing Histories of Middle Eastern Immigration to the Puget Sound

HSTCMP 590
Spring Quarter 2022

Instructor: Dr. Arbella Bet-Shlimon (shlimon@uw.edu)
Office: Smith 204A

Course Description:

This seminar will approach, and contribute to, the writing of histories of Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the Puget Sound region through histories of West Asian and North African migration to the Americas. A central aim of this course is to produce new historical research through public interlocutors and, in turn, make that research legible and available to broader publics. The work completed in this seminar will therefore also have a life and afterlife beyond the boundaries of the ten-week quarter. Scholars in the academy are at least partially—and often fully—reliant on publics for funding, physical infrastructure, and the germinal material from which they produce their own scholarship. This seminar therefore seeks to make this important facet of our work visible and central.

Over the course of the twentieth century, immigrants to the United States from the predominantly Arabic-speaking and Persian-speaking regions of what we now call the Middle East developed shared diaspora identities such as “Arab” and “Persian.” Those identities were racially intertwined with whiteness in the United States. The first wave of West Asian immigrants, mostly Syrians, fought to obtain “white” racial status in a Jim Crow-influenced legal and social system in the early twentieth century, and they benefited materially from anti-Black racism. However, Arabs, Persians, and other Middle Easterners have never been accepted as unconditionally white in the United States, even if certain legal structures, like the US Census, classify them as such. The positionalities of Middle Eastern immigrant communities in the United States have been fraught and deeply contentious, and they have shifted and evolved over the past century. They have been contingent on American racial politics, foreign policy, and political developments in immigrants’ regions of origin, as well as intracommunal relations and conflicts among these immigrants themselves.

Existing scholarship on Middle Eastern migration to the Americas has focused primarily on the Arab American communities of Southeast Michigan, New York, and, very recently, California, whereas there is virtually no scholarship on the more than century-old Middle Eastern immigrant community of the Puget Sound area and very little work that seeks to understand these communities beyond dominant ethnic categories like “Arab” and “Persian.” Students in this seminar will thus explore critical new angles on this topic, producing new knowledge on Middle Eastern migrations and diasporas. They will make contact with local organizations serving and representing this population with the aim of creating a collaborative public history project. This will take the form of recorded oral histories made available on a digital platform. Students in the course will determine collectively what they would like the oral history project to focus on. Grading in this seminar will be based on self-assessment of the work done by each participant to gather and curate oral histories of Middle Eastern immigration.

Weekly Schedule:

Note: all readings can be found in PDF format on the Canvas course website, or, in the case of electronic resources, linked from the website.

Week 1: General discussion of aims of course, public scholarship, and oral history methodology, including avoidance of the “U.S. researcher/native informant” dichotomy

Week 2: The Michigan diaspora

- Excerpts from Sally Howell, *Old Islam in Detroit* (2014) and Andrew Shryock et al., eds., *Arab Detroit* (2000)

Week 3: Other Arabophone diasporas, including the US West and Latin America

- Excerpts from Stacy Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente* (2019); Sarah Gualtieri, *Arab Routes: Pathways to Syrian California* (2019); Arianne Ishaya, *Familiar Faces in Unfamiliar Places* (2010); and Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar* (2017)

Week 4: Conceptions of race and religious subjectivity in MENA diaspora groups in the Americas

- On race: excerpts from Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White* (2009); Neda Maghbouleh, “From White to What? MENA and Iranian American Non-White Reflected Race,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2019)
- On religious subjectivity: excerpts from Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims of the Heartland: How Syrian Immigrants Made a Home in the American Midwest* (2022)

Week 5: Discussion of primary source bases available to the public and existing public history on Arabophone diasporas

- Pamphlets by the Arab American Institute, the Arab American National Museum, and the Washington Street (“Little Syria,” Manhattan) Advocacy Group
- Exercise: find information on a specific immigrant community in the database of the Khayrullah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies, North Carolina State University

By the end of week 5, students will have made contacts and scheduled interview times with my assistance based on the ethical and methodological discussion we had in the first week. They will use contact information gathered by a research assistant in Summer 2021 (with Simpson Center support) of members of local Middle Eastern community members and organizations to make these connections. Through our previous weekly discussions, they will also have decided what they would like the parameters of the oral history project to be, including any key themes to focus on or specific questions to ask participants.

Weekly meetings from this point forward will primarily be supportive check-ins in which we discuss how the work is progressing and make plans for how to complete the project beyond the end of the quarter (since it’s unlikely to fit precisely into a ten-week schedule). Students will have the option to

continue to be associated with the project after the end of the quarter or not. Either way, they must submit a recording and transcript of the oral history they produce along with a short reflective essay on the course's major themes in which they assess their own work in order to receive credit for the course.

Week 6: Revisiting discussion of the oral history method: ethics and challenges, as well as technical issues such as transcription

- A key question: do you need to schedule more than one session to complete your oral history?

Weeks 7, 8, and 9: Check-ins on progress on oral history, making plans to meet the goal of completing one recording and one transcription. Potential meetings (most likely via Zoom) with members of local organizations who may want to collaborate in the hosting or promotion of the oral history project.

Week 10: Submission of completed oral history recording and transcription, and discussion of how to approach self-assessments. Discussion of who would like to continue to be associated with the project.