

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT:

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR ENAYA OTHMAN

Dr. Othman, as a professor in Marquette's Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, you've taught a range of Arabic language courses as well as courses focusing on Arab and Muslim culture in the U.S. and across continents. You've been a professor at Marquette since 2009 (as part time Arabic instructor). What brought you to Marquette and what do you most enjoy about the courses you teach and the students you teach each day?

I chose Marquette for many good reasons! The most relevant reason is that as a Catholic school, Marquette's Ignatius values intersected with the values I uphold dear as a Muslim. In addition, Marquette provided the best environment for me to research and teach the issues of marginalized communities. I most enjoy teaching topics that create awareness and lead to critical thinking, and I enjoy exploring with my students how history, culture, religion, and gender intersect to shape the lives of the marginalized groups.

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I understand that you mentor and train interns to conduct and then transcribe oral interviews. How do you train them in this skill set and what advice do you give them? The work of gathering and transcribing qualitative data must be very time consuming. What sort of time frame are you looking at when you pursue research grounded in oral interviews?

I start with the importance of oral interviews and public history. I walk the interns the techniques and methods, the legal issues, how to deal with human participants, and how to engage them as collaborators and not just as subjects. The workshops for training last a few hours and the most important tips/takeaways are interviewer's motivation, building trust with narrator, indicating empathy when appropriate, showing appreciation for the narrator's help, asking questions in a sensitive manner, and most importantly listening carefully and showing interest in what the narrator says.

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Over the last few years, a renewed interest in traditional dress has emerged among Muslim women working in a variety of professional fields; thus implying that dress offers a sense of agency and empowerment that can change a dominant or misleading narrative. This movement emerged before the devastating October 7th attacks by Hamas and genocidal retaliation of Netanyahu's government. Has this renewed interest in traditional dress been affected by the events of the past five months? In what ways?

Different indigenous groups including Palestinians embrace their material culture in the face of genocidal violence and cultural erasure. Revitalization of cultural dress in diaspora and refugee camps and ascribing new meanings to it has been empowering for Palestinian women for decades. But what has been happening in Gaza and West Bank in recent months has intensified their efforts to reclaim their identity and symbolize cultural survival through traditional clothing. Palestinian dress is also increasingly becoming a garment of resistance against colonialism and a symbol of solidarity across the globe.

"PALESTINIAN DRESS IS ALSO INCREASINGLY BECOMING A GARMENT OF RESISTANCE AGAINST COLONIALISM AND A SYMBOL OF SOLIDARITY ACROSS THE GLOBE."

You were recognized last summer with a Fulbright Scholar Award to study this movement in the Palestinian Territories and Jordan. The Fulbright was awarded to you before the devastation in the (Gaza Strip and West Bank) Near East. As of this week, you are now in Jordan to gather stories and conduct oral interviews. In what ways has this impacted the research you are pursuing, where you were planning to be, and the considerations you must now take into account?

I had planned to be in Palestinian Territories for research, but Fulbright decided to terminate the trip to Palestinian Territories. Accordingly, we created a new plan; I will stay in Jordan and will be conducting my interviews among Jordanians and Palestinians in different cities, and I will be visiting Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan. I also adjusted my questionnaire according to the new plan.

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If facilitated correctly, higher education offers students an opportunity to identify and uncover their blind spots and to be made aware of the narratives used to frame histories. What questions have you found fruitful for your own journey in higher education that you would be willing to also pose to those reading this faculty spotlight?

I find questions problematizing the interrelated issues of binaries, knowledge, and power beneficial. So, I first ask my students to reflect on their ideas about the communities we address; how these perceptions are formed, and how different they would be when told from other perspectives. In this way, I dismantle binaries and biases while highlighting the complexity, contradictory, and diversity surrounding any topic.

