

# Teaching Humanities in the Arabian Gulf: toward a pedagogical ethos

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## Introduction

As Palfreyman (2004) points out in his editorial preface to the first issue of this journal, the great majority of university education in the Arabian Gulf region is a cross-cultural affair in which Western and Western-trained instructors deliver courses to *Khaleeji* (Arabian Gulf) students. The pedagogical complexities of this dynamic are both significant and understudied. In what follows I want to sketch an approach to teaching Humanities texts – particularly those of the Western tradition – to students in the Gulf. The guiding ethic of the approach is a vigilant respect for the student and her beliefs, and a concomitant insistence on spurring critical thought and intellectual growth through challenging students' perceptions of their world. Clearly this ethic is also a problematic, for how does one simultaneously challenge student perceptions while respecting their cultural beliefs? To explain my own negotiation of this tension I draw upon the work of scholars involved in 'critical pedagogy' and attempt to apply some of their insights to the rather unique exigencies of the Humanities classroom in the Gulf. Calling on the insights of critical pedagogues and relevant cultural theorists, I offer several examples of a Humanities pedagogy that accounts for the cultural-historical complex of higher education in the region. My argument is not motivated by certainty about the proposed pedagogical ethos and the practice that grows from it; rather it responds to an urgent need for creative discourse in this area. It aims to open up a wider discussion, not to proffer the final word.

Unfortunately, the critical conversation that I join in this essay is somewhat subdued. In recent years scholars and teachers of the Humanities throughout the academic world have been compelled to produce arguments which stand against the logic of bureaucracies and administrations tacitly beholden to dictates of capitalistic expediency that can suffocate any serious consideration of humanistic study – let alone the nuances of Humanities pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> It is not difficult for the art historian or literary critic in the Gulf to identify with the anxieties of American colleagues who worry “about the relevance of the Humanities and the threat of diminished resources in a society and university structure that favor the grant-based sciences and their more tangible results and concrete links to industry and public policy” (Anderson, 2009, p. 20). Partly because of the perceived threat presented by the skepticism of budgetary gatekeepers, those interested in teaching humanistic texts often find themselves defending the importance of doing so, rather than discussing the intricacies of how those texts might be taught. Discourse about the challenge of actually teaching humanistic texts in the Gulf rarely takes place in sanctioned forums. Instead, it is most often relegated to the hallway conversations of excited and perplexed instructors who want to help their students engage with course material.

The marginalization of this type of discussion in the Gulf is acutely problematic because the cross-cultural educational environment of the region often gives rise to situations in which instructors who have no explicit training in pedagogical techniques suited to *Khaleeji* societies regularly present students with texts that have little history in the region. It is fair to say that most instructors in the Humanities are feeling their way through terrain that is quite uncharted, in a field that is “heavily value-laden”

(Martin, 2009, p.300) – a field that bristles with contentious, subjective questions about aesthetics and pleasure, philosophy and governance, and morality and justice, to say nothing of divinity and religious belief.

When confronted with these complexities in a demanding and potentially fecund text, the conscientious instructor may turn to secondary material that might fortify his teaching. However, in the wealth of textual and pedagogical criticism focused on canonical mainstays, he may not easily find commentary applicable to the demands of his classroom. Just as he cannot simply import his lecture-notes from the Humanities course he taught in America or Australia, or rely entirely upon his graduate study at a British or Canadian university, the Humanities instructor in the Gulf cannot allow his pedagogy to be too-simplistically informed by secondary literature that addresses itself to a Western intellectual milieu. If he seeks to fully honor, challenge, and engage his students, the instructor must spend time developing sometimes novel pedagogical and interpretive frameworks. To put it simply, he must recognize that teaching Humanities in the Gulf is not the same as teaching Humanities in the West.<sup>2</sup> The texts he presents will signify differently; his students will ask different questions and have different interests, strengths and weaknesses.

### **Outlines of a critical pedagogy for Humanities teaching in the Gulf**

My emphasis on the need to recognize the unique conditions facing the Humanities instructor in the Gulf finds theoretical resonance with advocates of critical pedagogy – like Freire (2006/1970), Kincheloe (2008), Giroux (2003) and others – who reject the assumption that dictates of “teaching and learning are true in all places and all times” (Kincheloe, 2009, p.7). These theorists call for fluidity and flexibility in a philosophy of education that requires – and thus trusts – instructors to vigilantly assess and adjust their pedagogy in response to an evolving classroom. With critical pedagogy instructors aim to establish a learning environment that is dialogic, in which teacher and student engage in an ongoing conversation that helps develop critical consciousness in all participants. This dynamic style of pedagogy challenges instructors to “not only understand subject matter in a multidimensional and sophisticated manner but... also be able in diverse settings to view such content from the vantage point of culturally and psychologically different students” (Kincheloe, 2009, p.8). These are daunting expectations that should speak powerfully to Humanities instructors in the Gulf. As a cadre of expatriate instructors with cultural and ideological experiences quite different than those of their students attempts to produce an empowering Humanities pedagogy, there is an obvious need for professional discourse characterized by deep reflection and lively exchange. Yet, in English, the literature discussing practical or theoretical approaches to Humanities pedagogy in the Gulf is quite thin. In the face of this neglect, I will leave aside questions about whether or not the Humanities should be taught in the Gulf and about the institutional changes that might make study of the Humanities more relevant in the region.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I want to contribute to a conversation that needs to grow in volume and sophistication – a conversation about the nuances that arise when we begin to think about *how* the Humanities should be taught in this region.

As a beginning, it is worth clarifying that, while I presume that Humanities pedagogy in the Gulf must be carried out with special sensitivity to specific cultural realities in the region, the underlying philosophy of the pedagogical style I propose is universal. It is premised on the belief that teaching is best when it rejects what Freire (2006/1970) definitively derided as the “banking model” (p. 93) of education in which so-called knowledge is deposited into the inert student-recipient, and when it promotes a “restive problematization of the given” which forces student and instructor to question the natural order their worlds “and the ‘official’ accounts of how they came to be” (Dean, 1994, p. 4). The Humanities pedagogy I attempt to practice, and which I am sketching herein, strives to honor the cultural, religious

and intellectual customs of the Gulf, yet is at the same time committed to the ideal of liberal education which seeks to “unsettle presumptions, to defamiliarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them to find ways to re-orient themselves” (Harvard University, 2007, pp. 1-2). It holds that self-reflection and genuine learning is inspired when the student is presented with an unsettling idea, and must seek to position herself in relation to it.

How, then, does an instructor of the Humanities practice a delicate pedagogy that respectfully yet provocatively helps to ‘unsettle’ the thinking of his students in the Gulf? To begin an answer to this question it is first necessary to acknowledge that students in the Gulf – like anywhere – think in diverse ways and subscribe to individual worldviews that should not be oversimplified by cultural generalizing. The complex diversity of thought that exists in any classroom makes the task of the ‘unsettling’ instructor particularly demanding and dynamic. A concept that startles the intellect of one student may merely confirm the assumptions of another. This range of thinking that always confronts the instructor makes it difficult to institutionalize ‘disorienting’ pedagogy; however, if the benefit of *challenging* teaching is accepted, it also underscores the urgent need for individual instructors to develop pedagogical practice that is constantly sensitive, responsive and quick-witted.

In articulating the outline of an astute, regionally-focused critical pedagogy I will look to a number of issues that have significant bearing on Humanities teaching in the Gulf at the beginning of the twenty-first century. First, I will consider the deployment of the Western canon in Humanities teaching in the Gulf, arguing that, if delivered with appropriate care, texts of the West can help in the development of critical consciousness in *Khaleeji* students. To exemplify this I take up Alfred Camus' short story "The Guest" and elaborate a critical reading of the text that I have offered to my students in the effort to defamiliarize their experience of higher education in the Gulf. My reading of the Camus story, which focuses on issues of education and the colonial history of the "Arab World," leads into a brief consideration of pedagogical engagement with gender and power in the Arab post-colonial context. Finally, I close with some thoughts about defamiliarizing pedagogy and students' perceptions of the West. Taken together, I hope that these minor forays into complex issues serve to evoke a pedagogical ethos suited to Humanities teaching in the Gulf.

## **The Western instructor, the Western canon**

Although it may be obvious, it should be noted that advocating for the Humanities is not synonymous with advocating for the Western canon. Despite my own training in and fascination with this body of work, I teach it in the Gulf because I am compelled to do so by program design, not because I believe that Western texts are *the* ideal instruments for teaching the Humanities in the region. Only a chauvinistic and recalcitrant few would contend that intellectually and morally enlarging potential inherent in art is restricted to a certain set of texts from the West. Indeed, the American ‘Culture Wars’ which flared in the 1980’s and ’90’s illustrate that Western society itself is deeply ambivalent about the status, utility and boundaries of the Western Canon as it is offered to students in the West. During these so-called wars the staunchest supporters of Humanities curricula anchored in Western classics were often arch-villains in the discourse of critical pedagogy to which I appeal. For example, progressive educators produced heated responses to conservative Allan Bloom and his well-known jeremiad, *The Closing of the American Mind* – a book which advocated for the Western Canon and bewailed perceived philistinism in an American society and system of higher education that was becoming increasingly multicultural. Critical pedagogy theorists McLaren & Da Silva (1993) characterized Bloom’s arguments as a racist fantasy in which “the non-Western thinker who traffics in magic or ritualism... becomes the

debased and inverted image of the hyper-civilized metropolitan intellectual who deals in ideological artifacts.” In Bloom’s writing they perceive the mistaken belief that “Euro-American civilization is keeping the grandeur of the savage at bay in the name of Truth” (p. 50). However fair or unfair it may be judged, McLaren & Da Silva’s characterization of Bloom’s positions represents a warning to the purveyor of the Western Canon in the Gulf. If, in the context of American society, it is possible to read advocacy of the Western classics as an implicit attack upon the “dark, primitive culture of the mob” (p. 50), it is important that the Humanities instructor in the Gulf guard against this perception by doing everything in his power to ensure that his teaching of Western texts is never tantamount to a disparagement of non-Western culture generally, and the culture of the Gulf in particular.

Some will contend that certain great Western texts are infused with universal resonance and are, therefore, suited for study in any classroom anywhere in the world. However, even if this is accepted, we should recognize that in the Gulf there is no completely self-evident argument for the study of Socrates and the neglect of Confucius. Furthermore, we should detect more than a faint whiff of cultural imperialism when, for example, the thought of Ibn Sina receives short shrift while students are continually exposed to tenants of European philosophy. As they teach texts of the Western canon in the Gulf, instructors must remain ever-cognizant that they are participating in a problematic enterprise that is not unconnected to the forces of imperialism and globalization that have sustained the economic, cultural and geo-political power of the global North.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as the instructor day after day delivers his or her lesson plan on some aspect of Western Humanities they must sooner, rather than later, sense the neocolonial undertones of the endeavor. How can instructors avoid this awareness as they note that the university system they work within is based on an American model? As the instructor sympathizes with the difficulty students face in a language of instruction that is not their own? As he or she attempts to clarify those elementary aspects of Western culture that *Khaleeji* students struggle to identify with? The teacher must realize that, regardless of intentions, they work with their students in a system that cannot be divorced from a history of global and regional colonialism. Acknowledging the oppressive aspects of that history, the instructor should seek to honor students by avoiding pedagogical practices that replicate regimes of colonial education which consistently devalued non-European cultures while valorizing the West.

Toward this end, the instructor must have the honesty and courage to help students contemplate the historical context in which their education takes place – an imperative of critical pedagogy. Rather than ignoring or veiling the obvious, the instructor should help students come to terms with the reality and the irony of their Westward educational orientation. There are a myriad ways of beginning this contemplation with students; however, whatever strategy is chosen it is likely to make the instructor vulnerable. In this process his or her position of authority in the classroom and the centrality of the texts presented will be understood as a function of historical circumstance, rather than an ontological given. (Perhaps the simplest way of sparking critical dissonance in the classroom experience of Gulf students is to help them recognize that the ascendancy of English in the region – and its status as the practical *lingua franca* of the world – is not the result of mere happenstance, but rather is intimately linked to the successful ambition of British and American imperialism). By encouraging students to think about the way in which history and forces of globalization impinge upon their very classroom, the instructor defamiliarizes the act of learning itself and promotes a meta-learning through which students are empowered because the instructor has authorized critical evaluation of the educational order in which the instructor and student operate. This critical evaluation may lead some students to suspect that the instructor and his materials are willing instruments of a Western cultural imperialism. Yet, however onerous this suspicion may be, the instructor should welcome it, for in the effort to prove it

unwarranted he will take extra measures to ensure that his pedagogy does not, in fact, promote mythologies of Western supremacy.

In itself, the study of Western texts in the Gulf cannot be condemned, for ultimately these artifacts are the expression of cultural genius, the heritage of which is the birthright of all human beings. As Said (1993) points out, it is when cultural texts are cast as evidence of the superiority of one people in relation to another that we have fallen into the false, divisive logic of cultural imperialism. Dubious of those paranoid purists in the West who fear the sully of Western curricula with texts from “outside” canons, Said warns that “trying to say that this or that book is (or is not) part of ‘our’ tradition is one of the most debilitating exercises imaginable” (p. xxv). He emphasizes the universality of the principle at work asserting, “I have no patience with the position that ‘we’ should only or mainly be concerned with what is ‘ours,’ any more than I condone reactions to such a view that require Arabs to read Arab books, use Arab methods and the like.” While the diversity of the texts we assign is an indication of what we think about the diversity of human genius, Said helps us to recognize that how we teach texts, may be as important as which texts we teach.<sup>5</sup>

### **“The Guest” in the Classroom**

However, few would dispute that it is when thoughtfully selected texts are presented in provocative ways that we can have the most hope for an astute productive pedagogy. Albert Camus’s short story *The Guest* is an example of a text that, when judiciously presented, offers fertile ground for the consideration of colonial and post-colonial education. Although the story bears the mark of an implicit and insidious literary racism, it is simultaneously primed for instructors wishing to call attention to and disrupt the colonial resonance that can echo through the post-colonial classrooms of the contemporary Gulf.

Camus’s text can be sincerely distilled as the narrative of a Western educator in an Arab land. Thus, in its most elemental structure, the text invites self-reflection for many Humanities instructors in the Gulf, and offers their students a fictional approximation of the educational project that they populate. Given the basic facts about character and setting, it would seem impossible to approach the story without interrogating its themes of cultural encounter vis-à-vis education; yet a sampling of the rich secondary literature will not suggest transparently an interpretive lens that will illuminate the classroom situation of Gulf students. Indeed, because Camus is regarded by many as a philosopher who wrote fiction – rather than a ‘fiction writer’ – criticism on his work often ignores the Arab settings of so much of his writing. Said (1993) has noted that, for many, the author’s inclination to set his work in “an Algerian locale seems incidental to the pressing moral issues at hand. Almost a half century after their first appearance, his novels are thus read as parables of the human condition” (p. 175).<sup>6</sup> Because of the moral or existential dilemma at its heart, *The Guest* courts a similar mode of interpretation. However, for the purposes of my discussions here and in the classroom, the story’s engagement with education and colonialism is the primary concern.

The plot is catalyzed when an unnamed Arab murder-suspect is brought by *gendarme* escort to an isolated schoolhouse in the forbidding hinterland of colonial Algeria. Daru, the French protagonist, is a sympathetic schoolmaster who for one night must share his lonely quarters with the prisoner-guest while deciding whether or not to deliver his charge to colonial authorities, as the *gendarme* instructs. Alone with his guest, the Frenchman experiences a human camaraderie with the Arab. Philosophically, there are multiple, overlapping dilemmas that arise from the plot’s design. Should the protagonist free the suspected murderer and thus honor the sense of human connection that has so naturally sprung to life in the sequestered isolation of the schoolhouse? Or, should he, as a functionary of colonial

authority, deliver his prisoner to the judicial powers that will decide his fate according to the French system of law that has been imposed on Algeria? The schoolmaster despises his predicament and the imperative to choose a moral course of action. Read allegorically, the story seems to reiterate the Sisyphean philosophy that is associated with Camus – there are no good decisions, yet decisions must be taken. Finally, Daru chooses to free his prisoner, bidding him to escape to the Arab tribes who live in the region. Yet, after the schoolmaster has set the Arab on his way, Daru discovers that the prisoner's kinsmen have been observing invisibly and, having somehow misinterpreted the Frenchman's apparently goodwill, they have decided to take revenge upon him.

In any cultural context, the story brims with classroom potential. It forthrightly encourages explorations of moral philosophy and colonial history, and allows students to easily find their way into basic but rich questions about duty and justice. However, it is also a text that must be taught with great care because, in spite of its artistic achievements, Camus's story is animated by a type of "Orientalist" ethic which accentuates the psychological burden of its European protagonist while silencing the non-European figure who is blank and inscrutable, a hollow prop in the drama of the Western mind. Indeed, Camus's Arab has no name; he is almost devoid of language; he is feckless and seemingly without volition; and yet he is also thought to be homicidal. As one critic puts it, "many commentators... see the prisoner as only marginally human" (Hurley, 1993, p. 82). The instructor working with this text must make every effort to examine the representation of the prisoner as a manifestation of colonial-era racism that says little about Arabs, while revealing much about the cultural psychology of the West. To ignore the genealogy and racist implications of Camus's representation is to practice a negligent pedagogy that is likely to diminish students rather than empower them. However, if the story is presented with proper regard, it can be deployed as a powerful tool in the effort to encourage students to think critically about their own experience of education in the Gulf.

*The Guest* is set in a land that is cold, bleak and hard. Camus reflects the withholding nature of this environment by rendering his prose in sparse sentences that texture the land and sky, but offer little description of more intimate setting. Daru's schoolhouse is described in the merest outline. Yet there is one detail that Camus throws into relief – a blackboard bearing a stark lesson in geography and culture. "On the blackboard the four rivers of France, drawn with four different colored chalks, had been flowing toward their estuaries for the past three days" (p. 2253). It is an ironic and significant sentence. The bountiful waterways that give rise to French metropolises flow across the board in symbolic, satirical contrast to the barren North African steppe that spreads beyond the schoolhouse. But the greater irony is one that has obtained in the classrooms of colonial empires throughout the world. The decontextualized rivers of France indicate that Daru's Algerian pupils – evoked but unseen in the text – are trained in systems of knowledge that emerge from and focus upon the territory of the colonial ruler. Under this educational regime the Socratic imperative, "Know thyself," is distorted into "Know thy master." Thus, despite his moral complexity, Daru is recognized as a conventional colonial schoolmaster, teaching his students to identify with and revere a subjugating European civilization.

Calling attention to this critical detail of the text should generate reflective disruption in the Gulf classroom. Daru's lesson on the French rivers is ironically comparable to the instructor's focus on Camus's story. In both cases sanctioned curricula call for the Arab student to turn toward Western points of reference. Of course, this similarity has the uncomfortable effect of likening the instructor to a colonial pedagogue – a notion that many teachers would seek to dismiss quickly. However, rather than hastening to complicate this comparison – which is not difficult and eventually necessary – when teaching Camus's story I have encouraged students to linger in their contemplation of the resonance between their immediate experience and the text before them. The purpose of this contemplation is not to inspire an outright rejection of their experience in the Humanities classroom, or of my own

teaching, as a neo-colonial charade. I aim to generate within students a sense of critical distance that allows them to view their education in the context of a complicated global history, to recognize their own classroom experience as one that has uncomfortable resonances with seemingly far-off times and places. My hope is to problematize the given-ness of one aspect of their life experience, the aspect in which my pedagogy is most prominent.

In closing, Camus's text returns to the blackboard with damning implication. Despite being directed toward his freedom by Daru, the Arab is last glimpsed "walking slowly on the road to prison." Dismayed by this choice, the schoolmaster returns to his classroom and there "on the blackboard among the winding French rivers sprawled the clumsily chalked-up words... 'You handed over our brother. You will pay for this'" (p. 2262). It is significant that this ominous and seemingly undeserved warning emanates from the tangle of waterways that represents the folly of colonial pedagogy. Here, the blackboard – that sturdy emblem of instruction – bears the marks of imposition, confusion, and the breakdown of communication across culture. It is the antithesis of enlightenment. It is a grim, cautionary symbol for those of us involved in systems of post-colonial education.

## **Pedagogy, gender and the Humanities classroom in the Gulf**

Critical pedagogy calls upon instructors to be acutely aware of the historical contexts in which education unfolds (Giroux, 2003). In part, this awareness allows teachers and students to recognize themselves as agents in a social drama that empowers some and suppresses others. Assuming that the stories and voices of the empowered constitute the familiar discourse of society, critical pedagogy attempts to draw attention to those perspectives that are not familiar, those not sanctioned by dominant social discourse. In turn, those influenced by theories of critical pedagogy often place considerable focus on "the margins" of society, the experiences and needs of individuals faced with oppression and subjugation" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 8). In fact some Western-trained critical educators would contend that the elimination of social injustices endured by marginal groups is the ultimate purpose of their vocation. This view of pedagogy as an 'emancipatory' or ameliorative project inspires many Humanities instructors to adopt feminist frameworks which take particular interest in the relations between gender and power, and which tacitly hope to foster social transformation through deep consideration of these relations. Although a full examination of the intersection of gender and cross-cultural pedagogy in the Gulf is beyond the scope of this brief essay, I am compelled to make some remarks about the place of gender in Humanities teaching in the region, and to recall the post-colonial history that frames this issue.

For a variety of reasons, Western-trained instructors may find themselves especially interested in using their pedagogy to address the situation of women in Gulf states. It may be that they sincerely feel that in the region "there is an absence of social activism and formal civil societies... where overt demands for women's citizenship rights are met with suspicion and resistance" (Devriese, 2008, p. 83). Or, he may be like the Americans that Ahmed (1984) cynically posits in an often-cited essay on Western perceptions of gender in the East: "Just as Americans 'know' that Arabs are backward, they also know with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded" (p. 522). Ahmed's hyperbole is not far from truth; the particularly downtrodden condition of women in the Arab world is near-axiomatic in public and even academic discourse of the West. As Ahmed adds, it is "one of those 'facts' lying around in this culture" (p. 522).

This received wisdom has the potential to poison the perceptions and perceptive abilities of the Western instructor in the Gulf. His capacity to assess the gender dynamics he observes in *Khaleeji* society – and in his students – is necessarily colored, and perhaps compromised, by a powerful and historied Western narrative about female subjugation in the Arab world. Ahmed and others have shown

that the West's somewhat ironic concern for Arab women's rights is not simply rooted in something like a pristine commitment to social justice arising from the European Enlightenment. Rather, Western attention to the issue gathered earnest momentum during a period of intense European colonial expansion and should be recognized as part of a larger discourse that sought to denigrate non-European cultures in the effort to justify imperial projects (Ahmed, 1992, p.150). Or, as Moghissi (1999) puts it, "Against the colonial backdrop, the role and status of the Muslim woman would become a stick with which the West could beat the East" (p. 16).

The continuing legacy of this ideological weapon is of significant consequence to the Humanities instructor in the Gulf. In the effort to promote critical thought about issues of gender, the instructor will have to tread carefully – acknowledging that it may be impossible for her to disentangle her perceptions of regional gender dynamics from her own assimilation of the discourse of Western imperialism. She must accept that feminist interpretive frameworks that provoke direct critique of Gulf society and culture are likely to be met with "resistance and suspicion" (Devriese, 2008, p. 84). Yet, if she is devoted to a pedagogy of problematization, she will find it impossible to avoid engagement with the constant interplay of gender and social power as it is represented in humanistic texts. Her task, then, is to "unsettle the presumptions" her students have about gender without replicating the West's dubious browbeating of the East.

There are numerous strategies that might help instructors negotiate this inter-cultural complexity. One that finds implicit corroboration in Ahmed's seminal work (1984, p.533) on gender and culture involves a universalizing of the feminist critique that is presented in the classroom. Ahmed (1992) shows that the West's Victorian Era critique of gender and power in the East made use of a distorted feminism that championed certain women's rights in the Arab world while opposing the feminist attack on patriarchal dominance in Europe: "Feminism on the home front and feminism directed against white men was to be resisted and suppressed; but taken abroad and directed against the cultures of colonized people, it could be promoted in ways that admirably served and furthered the project of the dominance of the white man" (p.153).

Acknowledging the hypocrisy of this selective feminism, and the damage it has done to the 'feminist cause' in the Arab world, the instructor in the Gulf would do well to demonstrate his commitment to a universal feminism. In his effort to do this, he would adopt the thoroughgoing position that patriarchy, and the pervasive patriarchal ideology that exists in almost all known societies, marginalizes women from every world culture, and has done so throughout history. By clearly anchoring his feminist pedagogy in the assumption that the struggle for women's rights is on-going throughout the world, the instructor in the Gulf can begin to mute the resonance of Western admonishment even as he challenges his students to think critically about gender, power and *Khaleeji* society.

It is perhaps needless to point out that in Humanities teaching critical thought about gender issues can be promoted effectively and organically through the thoughtful selection of texts – or, that classroom discourse centered on women's work necessarily will begin to problematize conventional gender order. Still, in systems of higher education throughout the world, sustained consideration of women's perspectives remains far from customary. Thus, centering classroom discussion on texts produced by women is, in itself, a form of defamiliarizing pedagogy. Indeed, concentrating on those works that "reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category" (Felski, 1989, p.14) – to use one definition of 'feminist text' – allows instructors to create a classroom discourse that challenges familiar ideas about gender not only in the Gulf, but throughout the world.

In attempting to foster classroom conversations that inspire critical thought about gender and power, the instructor may judiciously turn toward feminist texts of the Western Canon. Teaching these texts,

rather than the feminist work of Arab writers, is in some ways an advantage for the Humanities instructor in the Gulf. By focusing on texts that engage women's subordination in Western society, the instructor can expose his *Khaleeji* students to trenchant feminist critique without echoing colonial and neo-colonial condemnation of Arab-Islamic culture. Although some students may disassociate their own life-experience from the "lessons" of the Western text – imagining, for example, that Antigone's mortal struggle against Creon's patriarchal dominion has no relation to the gender dynamics of their own moment and place – many others will recognize the universal resonance of a text such as Antigone.

The job of the instructor is not to impose a fixed relation between a feminist reading of a text and the student's experience of his or her own life and society. That is to say, the instructor need not suggest with a heavy hand that the patriarchal order of Creon's city-state approximates the gendered hierarchies of his students' nation-state. Instead the instructor might use a text like *Antigone* to call simple and provocative attention to the relation between gender and power in human societies – a relation that is so familiar as to be forgotten. He will point to the way that Creon, whose statist authority is challenged by Antigone's disobedience before the law, conflates the power of the state and masculine authority. He will show that Creon understands his punishment of Antigone to be both a restoration of order in the state and retaliation against a woman who, in her defiance of the male king, would disrupt the "natural order of gender" (McCoskey & Zakin, 2009, p. 124).

Simply guiding students toward a consideration of the implications of gender in a text is a fairly modest form of critical pedagogy. However, instructors in the Gulf may find considerable efficacy in this strategy which pays close attention to feminist issues without demanding that students make explicit connections between "women's subordinate position" in texts and the marginalization of women in *Khaleeji* society. This sensitive pedagogy is simultaneously attentive to critical gender issues and to the colonial history that tacitly frames these issues in the Gulf. Rather than prescribing proper interpretations of text and society, it honors students by assuming that those who are fit will produce the type of authentic critique that is the best foundation for home-grown social transformation.

## Intercultural apologetics

My discussion of Humanities pedagogy in the Gulf has primarily concentrated on the tension that exists between the imperative to inspire critical thinking in students through problematizing the familiar and the importance of remaining sensitive to the culture and history in which the enterprise of education takes place. In this context much of my concern is directed at the particular exigencies that arise when offering a Westward oriented Humanities curriculum to students in the Gulf. I have tried to show how the insights of critical pedagogy can help instructors present the texts of the West without chauvinistically imposing Western epistemologies and values on students who are valiantly navigating the nascent and profoundly intercultural university systems in the Gulf. In some ways, the pedagogy I am advocating may err on the side of deference to the cultural conventions of the region. Noting this deference, the skeptic may wonder how a pedagogy can be truly provocative and defamiliarizing if it continually yields before students' sensitivities. While this criticism has value, the skeptic should consider the radical alienation that the *Khaleeji* student is likely to experience when she finds herself studying Western canons in English. It is difficult to overestimate the challenge – and the potential value – that such circumstances present to students. Indeed, by studying Humanities in a Gulf university, the *Khaleeji* student embarks upon a defamiliarizing learning experience, *ipso facto*.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is not hard to imagine that the Westward oriented university system and course curricula may at times breed a certain form of resentment in the Gulf student – particularly in the student who may be struggling in her studies. While I have emphasized the importance of mitigating student

resentment and suspicion through deference before cultural sensitivities of the region, I think that it is equally important for instructors to resist any anti-intellectual disparagement of the West that may crop up in student thinking. If the instructor is continually looking for appropriate opportunities to problematize assumptions, she will not allow students' knee-jerk or facile criticism of Western culture to go unchallenged; neither will she pass on the opportunity to inspire nuanced appreciation and sympathy for the West.

Indeed, before closing I want to draw attention to a subtle complexity which suggests that a Humanities pedagogy for the Gulf may also call for a shrewd form of apologetics in defense of Western culture. Recent research has shown that Muslim publics harbor high levels of mistrust for the West and often consider Westerners to be immoral.<sup>8</sup> While it is unlikely that these assumptions are perfectly reflected among aspiring Humanities students, the realities of cultural difference and historical antagonism suggest that such attitudes may form a familiar strand of discourse in *Khaleeji* societies. If he views himself as an agent of intercultural cohesion, the instructor will hope that his pedagogy implicitly problematizes this discourse which plays a role in sustaining intercultural antagonism. Yet, many of the texts he presents to his students, ironically, may confirm a dim view of the West.

This is because durable humanistic texts – particularly in the literary arts – tend not to celebrate the societies from which they emerge. More often, these works are inherently critiques that point up human failures which are rooted in social and ideological milieu. While the texts themselves may be marshaled as evidence of great cultural achievement, the tragedies of Sophocles, for example, do not sing of the greatness of Ancient Grecian culture. On the contrary, they draw attention to social problems and contradictions which give rise to tragic consequence. The searching art of every culture lays bare the ideology of the culture; and in doing so it demythologizes the culture. In his writing on literary theory, the seminal post-structuralist Macherey (1978) explains that the “spontaneous ideology in which men live... is not simply reflected by the mirror of the book; ideology is broken, and turned inside out in so far as it is transformed in the text from being a state of consciousness. Art, or at least literature, because it naturally scorns the credulous view of the world, establishes myth and illusion as visible objects” (148-49).<sup>9</sup> Art's scorn of the credulous, its illumination of mythology, certainly facilitates pedagogies of defamiliarization. It allows students a contemplation of the inner workings or the realities of a society that are often suppressed by “‘official’ accounts.” Whereas cultural mythology almost always posits a narrative of celebration and exceptionalism, valuable art frequently questions that narrative by telling complex, tragic, plebian and sordid stories. Presenting students with the art of their own culture is an excellent means of forcing them to consider the illusory mythology of that culture.

When American students begin to study national classics such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Awakening*, *Death of A Salesman* or *A Raisin in the Sun* they are confronted by incisive critiques of the individualist, patriarchal and materialistic elements of American mythology. Each of these texts contains an unsettling appraisal of national culture that can inspire learning and intellectual development in the American students who try to integrate them into worldviews deeply influenced by a national mythology that trumpets the essential goodness of American culture and society. But what happens when these texts are presented to *Khaleeji* students?

In my experience, the humanist critique of the works mentioned is appreciated by Gulf students; like their American counterparts, they are engaged by the resonant difficulties and aspirations of protagonists whose portion sets them against the blind machineries of human society. However, Gulf students necessarily have a different relation to these texts than do American students. While the latter are invited to do the intellectually and, at times, emotionally challenging work of reconciling these American stories with jingoistic narratives of dominant national discourse, the *Khaleeji* student will not

be brought into a similar confrontation with the received wisdom of his or her culture. In fact, they may find that these texts underwrite a logic of hostility toward Western cultures; put simply, the student may perceive in these texts the suggestion that the secular liberalism of Western society is destructive, pernicious.

In the Gulf context these texts do not have precisely the same defamiliarizing potential that they do in the American context. It is unlikely that the *Khaleeji* student, looking in on Western culture through these texts, will be substantially disoriented by the critique of American society found therein. This difference in signification should remind the Humanities instructor that his approach to texts in the Gulf cannot simply reproduce pedagogical strategies worked out in relation to Western contexts. If the instructor believes in the imperative to defamiliarize students at the level of ideology, in the Gulf he may need to look to texts that were not pedagogically compelling to him in the West.

Remaining within the framing example of the American tradition, the instructor might choose to challenge his *Khaleeji* students by spending considerable time thinking about the work of a figure like Walt Whitman, whose poetry is a kind of seminal celebration of the American national project. In the vast catalogue of Whitman's verse students find example after example of the egalitarian, meritocratic American ideal that is widely admired throughout the world. While so much important American art describes the distance between this ideal and social reality, Whitman finds beauty in the very possibility of the American vision. Introducing Gulf students to Whitman's poetic voice, as it sings unabashedly about the nation that would become the world's hegemon, challenges them to reflect seriously on the beauty of the American ideal. Reading Whitman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Arabian Gulf may also prompt a consideration of how reverence for principles of inclusion, individual freedom and diversity may have played a role in America's rise to power.

When used as part of a sensitive critical pedagogy, strategies that foreground the beauty and efficacy in Western culture do not devolve into a form of neo-imperialist propaganda. Instead, this foregrounding can be a vitally constituent part of a pedagogy which challenges *Khaleeji* students to recognize the complexity of their world. The instructor who wants to inspire his students to think critically and dynamically will not allow them an easy recourse to regional narratives that may simplistically scorn Western culture. Just as he is vigilant in his effort to undercut the subtle assumptions of Western supremacy that gird certain texts and educational practices of the Humanities classroom in the Gulf, he will similarly point out weaknesses in the chauvinism that students may show toward the West. In this delicate process he will find himself pivoting through his pedagogy, always looking for opportunities to inspire growth in students through the promotion of attentive and critical thinking.

## Conclusion

The teaching strategies that I have outlined are fused by a pedagogical ethos that tries to account for the unique exigencies of delivering Western oriented Humanities curricula in the Gulf. I have not suggested a pedagogical program. Indeed, this ethos rejects the programmatic, believing that the thriving Humanities classroom is necessarily a volatile, spontaneous environment of enquiry in which the opportunities for learning are at once ubiquitous, precious and often unforeseen. Of course, the successful management of this environment requires research and planning. But the instructor who wants to be an agent of social transformation, while honoring and challenging his students, must be equally committed to crafting an evolving set of pedagogical principles that is particularly calibrated for the region. Chief among these principles must be an historical awareness and an attitude of cultural humility and deference. I have also emphasized the importance of interpretive frameworks that call

attention to and defuse discourses of Western supremacy that can be activated by humanistic texts of the West. These strategies serve to check the specter of cultural imperialism that might easily and insidiously filter into Westward oriented curricula in the Gulf. However, they are counterbalanced by a reverence for critical thinking that rejects any overly-simplistic disparagement of the West and its cultural products.

Clearly, the genuinely intercultural nature of Humanities teaching in the Gulf presents instructors with significant tests. Our navigation of uncharted pedagogical territory is treacherous because it is situated along one of the great cultural fault-lines of recent human history. There is no need to minimize this reality; only uncritical or Pollyanna-ish myopia allows us to ignore the ongoing and centuries-old antagonism between East and West. Whether one looks to the Manichean formulations of Samuel Huntington and his 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis (1997), or to the work of cultural scholars like Leila Ahmed (1992) who contend that the West has regarded the Islamic world as "the enemy" *par excellence* since the era of the Crusades (p. 151), or to simple sociological studies that reveal deep mistrust between contemporary Muslim and Western publics, it is clear that the processes of intercultural pedagogy that take place in Humanities classrooms throughout the Gulf are heavily burdened. However, working along the cultural fault-line should also bring with it a sense of exhilaration. The Humanities instructor in the region performs a special labor wherein carefully considered pedagogy is potentially a palliative that can create intercultural cohesion grounded in just, critical thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> For one well-argued defense of humanistic studies in the Gulf region see Brown, C.K. (2008). Humanistic inclusion: The case for the Humanities in the Gulf. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives* 5(2).

<sup>2</sup> Although the tenor of my commentary seems primarily to account for the experience of the Western instructor in the Gulf, I believe that the ethic of professional responsibility which I will outline holds interest for all instructors in the region, regardless of their national background. Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian scholar who is acknowledged among the foremost thinkers on gender and Islamic culture, has recalled the professional weaknesses that she brought to her early-career research in the Arabian Gulf. Surprised by the liberal thinking of some *Khaleeji* women, Ahmed acknowledges: "I [was], at the time still carrying my Mediterranean prejudices, (thoroughly reinforced by my Western training)" (1982, p. 529). A premise of this essay is that, particularly in the cross-cultural pedagogical contexts that prevail in the Gulf, one of the urgent responsibilities of the instructor, regardless of his cultural background, is the identification of and struggle against personal prejudices that may creep into his teaching. And, while there may be a handful of exceptions, the great majority of Humanities instructors in the Gulf received some significant part of their training in Western institutions, oriented toward a Western intellectual milieu that might tacitly breed certain forms of prejudice detrimental to pedagogy in the Gulf.

<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say, I think that study in the Humanities is vital in any society that hopes to cultivate a self-aware and open-minded citizenry capable of carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization. As Shaw (1997), a stipulates in his discussion of the function of the university in the Gulf, "development questions need to be critically theorized in the local context, which is historical, cultural and social, and not simply economic and political...A confident understanding of its own well-explored, authentic culture is an important distinguishing feature of a nation, rather than a mere state" (p. 8). If national institutions of higher learning aim to critically theorize cultural contexts in the region, programs of humanistic studies need to be vitalized rather than ignored – they must be further localized and made increasingly relevant to the students and the society which they serve. Unfortunately, a full exploration

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of program development is beyond the scope of this essay which addresses the immediate concerns of Humanities pedagogy in the actually-existing environment of contemporary Gulf universities. For one innovative approach to curriculum development in the Gulf see Al Balushi, K. (2010). Teaching English as discourse in Sultan Qaboos University. In *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives*. 7(1).

<sup>4</sup> Quoting Samih K. Farsoun and Lisa Hajir, K.E. Shaw draws attention to this fact in the introductory excerpt to his book *Higher Education in the Gulf*. Farsoun and Hajir point out that “[p]aradigms of social structure and social change, of economic development and associated values, ideologies and institutions have been exported to the Third World regions in the context of Western economic, political, military and ideological penetration into those areas. Ideas and models of socio-economic change, no less than commodities and armaments, have been packaged for export...academic institutions aid in this exportation process.”

<sup>5</sup> Graff (2009) makes a similar point in his essay “Why How We Read Trumps What We Read.” He argues that, so long as they are presented within a critical frame that forces to students read against the grain of the text, even banal products of popular culture – like the autobiography of Vanna White – can provide fertile ground for the development of critical reading and thinking skills in students. While he acknowledges that teaching these skills to students through texts that are intellectually substantive is probably more effective, his aim is to call greater attention to the method of pedagogy that we employ – or the style of reading that we teach. Graff insists that it “will not matter very much what texts or what kinds of texts we assign unless we provide students with models of criticism for talking and writing in literate way about any kind of text, whether a comic or a classic” (p. 73). In the Gulf a similar formulation applies. We may be better served by a regional discourse that concentrates on interpretive perspectives and pedagogical methods, rather than whether we will teach “Text A” or “Text B.”

<sup>6</sup> I am not suggesting that critical engagement with *The Guest* ignores the colonial situation that was so important to Camus’s writing and thinking. I mean only to point out that it is quite possible to engage the story in a way that downplays the significance of this theme in the text. For a reading that does just that see, “The Absurd as a Moral Guide: ‘The Guest by Albert Camus,’” in Yehoshua, A. (2000). *The terrible power of a minor guilt: Literary essays*. (Cummings, O. Trans.) Tel Aviv: Syracuse University Press.

<sup>7</sup> In their Report of the Task Force on General Education (2007), the Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences contend that a liberal education should expose students “to the sense of alienation produced by encounters with radically different historical moments and cultural formations and with phenomena that exceed their, and even our own, capacity fully to understand” (p. 2). Surely, the Westward oriented Humanities curriculums of the Gulf inherently produce this potentially educative experience of alienation in *Khaleeji* students.

<sup>8</sup> My point here is not to debate the merits of, or the reasoning behind, such views. Rather I want to evoke the presence of a zeitgeist that can hardly be ignored when considering Humanities pedagogy in the Gulf. For an in-depth discussion of this research see: The Pew Global Attitudes Project (2006). *The great divide: How Westerners and Muslims view each other*. Retrieved October 1, 2010 from <http://pewglobal.org/files/pdf/253.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Many thanks go to Kevin Meehan for suggesting this use of Macherey’s work. Part of the quotation appears in Meehan, K. (2009). *People get ready: African American and Caribbean cultural exchange*. University of Mississippi Press.