

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2021

CMENAS

ABOUT THE CENTER

The study of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region began at the University of Michigan (U-M) in 1889. Since the inception of the Center for Middle Eastern & North African Studies (CMENAS) in 1961, U-M has been committed to area studies and language training. In 1993, the center became a member of the university's International Institute, which seeks to stimulate research and teaching on critical areas of the world and foster cooperation among the university's departments, schools, and colleges.

Samer M. Ali

CMENAS Director and Associate Professor of Arabic Language and Literature

Ryan Szpiech

CMENAS Associate Director and Associate Professor of Medieval Iberian Cultures and Literatures

Kristin Waterbury

Academic Program Specialist

Mekarem Eljamal

Newsletter Editor

Rima Hassouneh

Community Outreach Coordinator

Nataša Gruden-Alajbegović

Global Projects Cluster Manager

Gabrielle Graves

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II Communications Editor

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FRONT COVER: Morocco by Marcel Baumgartner
BACK COVER: Lanterns embedded with islamic art by Rawan Yasser

DEAR CMENAS COMMUNITY,

After a winter of extreme weather, the tundra in Ann Arbor is beginning to thaw. But with your support, CMENAS has been busy behind the scenes through thick and thin promoting scholarship and understanding of the Middle East and North Africa.

In this issue, we give you a peek at what we've been up to:

- We had a tremendously successful Fall Colloquium on Zoom, focusing on the 10th anniversary of the Arab Spring. Here's our retrospective of the event (*page 6*)
- Read our piece on current CMENAS Student, Roxana Aras (*page 8*), our alumna, Nessma Bashi (*page 12*), and our new faculty colleague, Prof. Renee Randall (*page 14*)
- Our CMENAS outreach efforts are going strong with our signature MENA-SEA Teacher Program and this semester's work-place education at General Mills (*page 18*)
- In commemoration of the legacy of Dr. King, CMENAS and GISC joined forces to organize the 4th Annual MLK Day Lecture focusing on the culture of Nubia. Read more (*page 22*)

We welcome engagement with our global community, so wherever you are, please feel free to reach out to us [via email](#), [Twitter](#), or [Facebook](#).

We especially want to thank our CMENAS alumni and donors Carl Smith and Jere Bacharach who are helping us celebrate CMENAS @ 60 with candid interviews and recollections (*page 4*). Their sustained support of the work, year in and year out, enables us to fulfill our educational mission.

Last but not least: Ramadan Mubarak! Islam's holy month of fasting begins on April 13th.

Kind regards,
Samer M. Ali



REFLECTING ON 60 YEARS OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES *at the University of Michigan*

By Mekarem Eljamal

COVID-19 has taken a tragic toll on society; however, the shift to virtual communication has opened up many avenues of engagement. CMENAS alumni are located all across the globe, and where previously a video call was not the first form of communication we would turn to, now it has become second nature to suggest a Zoom call as the way to connect. CMENAS newsletter editor Mekarem Eljamal took the virtual turn of today's day and age and connected with two University of Michigan (U-M) alumni who studied the Middle East just as CMENAS was created.

Professors Carl Smith and Jere Bacharach attended U-M concurrently, each studying a different period of Middle Eastern history. Smith graduated with a PhD in contemporary history, and Bacharach's doctorate focused on the medieval era of the Middle East.

Bacharach's entrance onto U-M's campus began a couple of years prior to enrolling in the doctoral program in history.

"In 1960, I had already decided I wanted to study the Middle East, and there was an intensive Arabic program in Ann Arbor, and I went to that for the summer of 1960," he said.

Despite a bout of chickenpox that interrupted his studies, Bacharach still was able to make long-lasting faculty connections that pushed him to return to Ann Arbor.

"I met in the library a man named Andrew Ehrenkreutz who was teaching medieval Middle East history," he said. "And we got along famously, so I said to myself, this is where I want to go, and here's the man I want to work with."

After completing his Master's degree at the then-young Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, Smith made a career shift in deciding to pursue a doctorate at U-M.

"I was initially thinking of going into the foreign service. I actually had a job waiting for me with USAID," he said. "Two weeks before graduating, I was told that I had earned a Fulbright in Egypt, and the Fulbrights were just being restored after the 1956 Suez crisis. So naturally, to delay any commitment to anything, I took the Fulbright to Cairo."

Once they both arrived on campus for their programs in the early 1960s, they were immediately impressed by the vast number of courses available to them.

Bacharach noted that, by far, the most stimulating course he took during his time here was with Islamic art scholar Oleg Grabar, who later went on to Harvard University.

"He was always rolling out ideas and arguing back and forth with himself about the legitimacy of certain interpretations," Bacharach explained. "As a whole, most of the scholars were very exciting and engaging; the educational experience was spectacular."

CMENAS *is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2021!*

We would like to feature more alumni like Jere Bacharach and Carl Smith in future celebrations. If you are an alumnus, current student, community member, faculty, or staff member (past or present), we want to hear your favorite memories about your time with CMENAS. To share your stories or any photographs, you can fill out the following [CMENAS Stories form](#).

In the near future, we hope to celebrate this milestone in person and share the meaningful work that CMENAS has accomplished, so be on the lookout for special events and other programming.



Reflecting on his coursework, Smith laments the fact that he did not have a chance to take a class with Grabar but valued the classes beyond his Middle East studies focus, including a course with Dr. Sylvia Thrupp. That course, which included discussions on medieval music, brought Smith into contact with Master's students of music with whom, under most circumstances, he would not have crossed paths.

Their department's location in Lane Hall also expanded the social circles of Bacharach and Smith.

"In Lane Hall, we met people from South Asian studies and East Asian studies, and they were quite active in the social events, and we had the chance to get involved with them," Smith said. "At lunch, we would also play bridge, and that group included the students from South Asian studies and East Asian studies."

Just as the social scene and faculty pool for Middle East studies have grown over the years, so too has the very nature of studying the Middle East. Both Smith and Bacharach mentioned how the changes have moved the field forward and for the better.

"[Language] immersion programs were not really a thing that existed at the time," Smith noted and went on to explain how his language skills improved more so by necessity through his time in Cairo prior to attending U-M rather than through formal intensive language immersion coursework.

Bacharach expanded on Smith's point, explaining, "The reality is that languages were not stressed at the time and there was no federally mandated level of competence in a language. They never asked anybody questions of competence. The quality of Arabic and level of competence in languages for students of the Middle East is so much better now."

Bacharach commented on the homogeneity of students during his time at U-M compared to today.

"When I was there, it was pretty much all male. Maybe a couple of heritage students, but not many," Bacharach said. "I guess, for me, one of the great things about the study of the Middle East over time is the increasing role of heritage students, students from the Middle East region, and women."

10 YEARS LATER

By Kristin Waterbury

In November, CMENAS successfully concluded its annual Fall Colloquium featuring an array of U-M scholars who focused on the theme, *The Arab Spring: Ten Years Later*. Despite the ever-present pandemic that thwarted many plans, the colloquium was carried out smoothly via Zoom.

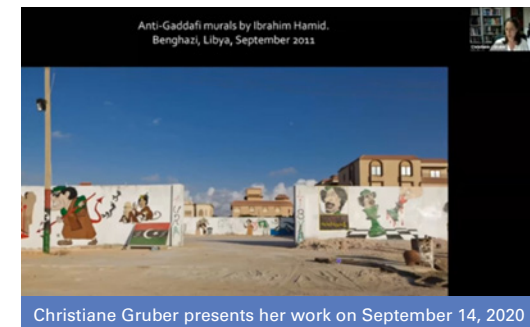
The series featured six speakers who focused their attention on the uprisings since 2011, known collectively as the Arab Spring. Syria, Egypt, Libya, and other countries have experienced the upheaval variously. In Syria, for instance, the conflict has lasted almost ten years. Weiser Center for Emerging Democracies Postdoctoral Fellow Matthew Cebul shared his research on the Syrian revolution; it contained interviews with Syrian activists and analysis of the revolution's start and outside support. Elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, the revolution took a different form. Amal Hassan Fadlalla reported how

both national and transnational processes are connected and how these processes shape immigrants' and trans-local actors' fight for and debates over equal citizenship rights, inclusion, and belonging. Reflecting on her work on Sudanese refugees, diaspora, and the current revolution in Sudan, Fadlalla's talk explored the influence of the quest for recognition and equal citizenship rights upon Sudanese activists' representation and imagination of both national and transnational citizenship.

Colloquium audiences also heard from scholars who studied the uprisings through the lens of art and popular media. Christiane Gruber shared her research examining the concomitant visual outputs of the Libyan uprisings. She showed several depictions of Muammar al-Gaddafi over time. The bombastic title, Afro-like hairdo, and eye-catching robes made the "King of Kings of Africa" an easy target for visual satire, which turned visibly



Matthew Cebul on November 2, 2020



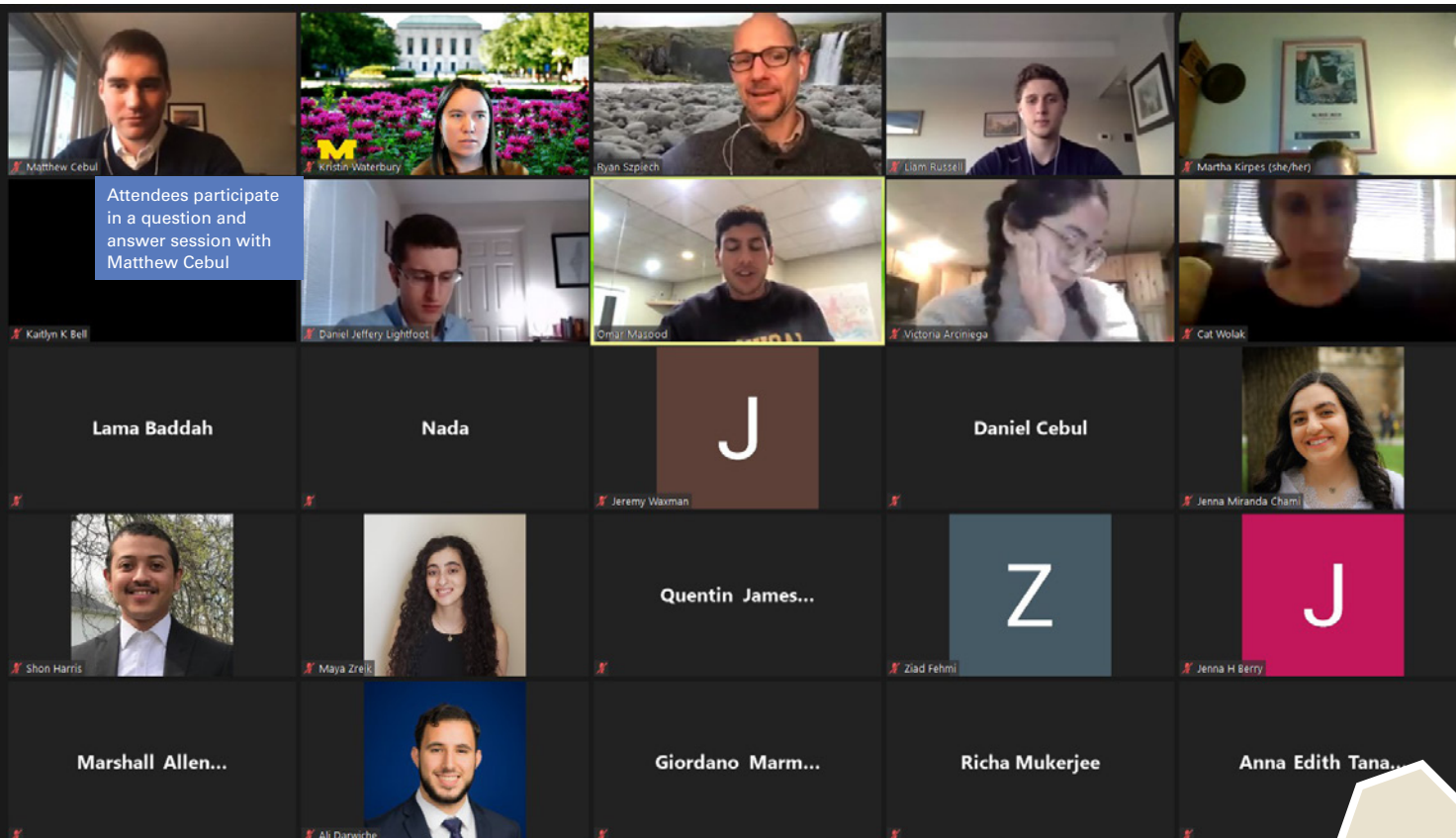
Christiane Gruber presents her work on September 14, 2020

more racist when al-Gaddafi began using mercenaries from sub-Saharan Africa to suppress street demonstrations in Libya. Yasmin Moll analyzed Egyptian media's driving force for the development of a "New Egypt." Sascha Crasnow examined the calls for revolution across the Arab world, which demanded equity for people of all genders and sexual orientations and the use of art to demonstrate their experiences. Each of these presentations illustrates the importance of how media and artistic expression can affect and influence these uprisings, as well as their legacy.

Mark Tessler's lecture tied many of the elements of the Colloquium series. His presentation highlighted the impact of events before, during, and after the Arab Spring upon opinions in the Arab world. His project *The Arab Barometer* has collected

data from various time periods, including a second wave of data from 2010-2011. Tessler shared selected findings about continuity and change in the views of the public, including attitudes toward governance and democracy, women's status and gender equality, Islam and political Islam, and terrorism. The quantitative data aggregated by *The Arab Barometer*, broad in scope, indicate that people across the MENA region hold a multitude of topical opinions frequently changing over time. The project now also gathers data about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing resources to scholars, policymakers, and others to better understand the region.

To view the CMENAS colloquium lectures, visit our [YouTube page](#).



Salafist demonstration in Tunis, 2012



Protest for women's rights, Tunis, 2012



Sascha Crasnow presents her work on October 5, 2020

6:08 PM AUGUST 4 BEIRUT

By Roxana Maria Aras

It was a pink, cumulus-like cloud rising from behind the skyscrapers of Achrafieh, Beirut. A piercing headache and blood dripping. Screams morphing with high-pitched car alarms. A collective state of bewilderment and dazed faces looking up in disbelief. What just happened? Was it an earthquake? Did one of the ubiquitous, cobbled up electricity motors explode? Is Israel bombing?

I recall the floor of my apartment shaking abruptly as my body entered into fight-or-flight mode. Monotone vibrations pierced the air seconds before a thundering sound rocked sea, land, bodies, and matter. “It is an earthquake,” I said to myself. A few miles away, my partner was running barefoot down a six-floor staircase, yelling at his neighbors to take shelter in the basement as Israelis were bombing. We each embody the defense mechanisms of previously lived trauma. Yet, none of these frames of interpretation fit the profile. Earthquakes do not start so abruptly, and Beirutis do not remember Israeli attacks causing such widespread destruction, even during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990. Gradually, amid the panic, victims flooding overcrowded hospitals, wounded bodies having to walk kilometers for medical care, and ruins across kilometers on end, the most absurd of all scenarios prevailed. Two thousand seven hundred and fifty tonnes of aluminum nitrate, a highly explosive substance, exploded in the port area of Beirut, sending a destructive blastwave engulfing most of the city (PHOTO 1). The blastwave also reached my rented studio in Achrafieh, where I used to write my daily fieldnotes after conducting ethnographic work among the Rum Orthodox community in Beirut. Shattered glass from broken windows fell on the photo camera that accompanied me during my 2018-2020 fieldwork in Lebanon. The camera, whose lens captured the nation-wide demonstrations unfolding between October 2019 and January 2020, took snapshots of empty streets amidst the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, and recorded Byzantine religious rituals perfected by centuries of practice and tradition.

It was the absent state and the active demos. In the days that followed, reverberations of the blast rippled through the collective stories we told each other about what had happened. Again, and again... stories on repeat in an attempt to collectively make sense of the surreal event. Before the blast, everyday life unfolded before and after the “October intifada,” discussions focused on the fluctuating price of the dollar and the imminent COVID-19 pandemic. After August 4, we spent our time talking about chemical substances, accountability, international help, trauma, and emigration. “Before” seemed like another world, another time. In one week, we aged a year only to feel that the explosion happened a couple of days before. We were asking ourselves, “A week has *already* passed?” while also feeling that “*only* a week has passed.” Everyone knew someone who died or was injured, and everyone had “five-minute” escape stories. “I was in the port area five minutes before the blast. If I had not taken an Uber order, I would have been dead.” “I was sleeping. If I had not heard your messages, I do not know what would have become of me.” But these “if” scenarios do not apply to all. They do not apply to over 200 dead, to at least 150 people permanently disabled, to more than 6,500 wounded, to those not found, and to over 300,000 whose homes and shops have been damaged or destroyed.¹ One of these victims is Maria, a young woman living and working in Beirut; she has been a reliable interlocutor for my research and a dear friend. I went to visit her at Hôtel-Dieu de France hospital, where she was rushed to after the explosion. With a fractured mandibula, she was trying to eat bland red jelly. To everyone coming in her room, she would display with shock and fascination the glass splinter that was removed from her right hand. In turn, everyone engaged in this game of fascination in order to avoid talking about stories that hurt stronger than

¹ Arwa Ibrahim, “Scarred for life: Beirut blast victims and life-altering wounds,” Aug. 25, 2020.

Ben Hubbard, “Beirut Blast Hit 3 Disparate Neighborhoods. Now They’re United in Rage,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 9, 2020.



the splinter. Maria’s mother had died in the blast and her ninety-year-old father was alone in a hospital, with no possibility of visiting because of COVID-19 restrictions. I kept looking at that red jelly, as flashbacks came to my mind of the two of us eating *tabbouleh* and *batata harra* a couple of days before at our favorite restaurant.

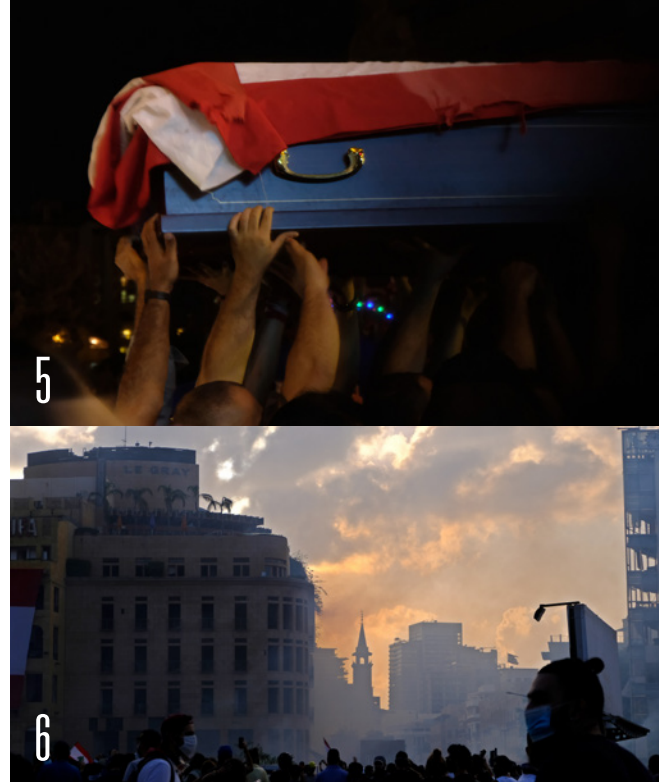
To the aid of the alive, hundreds of national and international volunteers and organizations showed solidarity and commitment by cleaning the streets from debris, catering to those in need of medical attention, distributing food, and assessing the affected urban infrastructure. Tired hands were writing down names and phone numbers of civilian casualties and young people were distributing sandwiches and water to the volunteers, all amidst the sounds of shovels, cracked glass, and unsettled dust. Conversely, real estate agents swarmed in the areas most affected by the blast, preying on the insecurities of those whose houses were destroyed and persuading them to sell below the market. The paradox of these dreams of real estate investments is their foundation on an urban infrastructure in ruins. Yet, in



Tired hands were writing down names and phone numbers of civilian casualties and young people were distributing sandwiches and water to the volunteers, all amidst the sounds of shovels, cracked glass, and unsettled dust.

all this commotion of solidarity and scamming, the only actor missing was the state. “dawle? Wein el dawle?” Lebanese always use this phrase to express a state whose failures materialize in the lack of basic utility services. A municipality incapable of assuring the cleaning up of public spaces after the explosion or collecting the trash piling up on the streets. A government whose representatives roam the streets for marketing stunts and photo sessions. An army that sporadically got involved in the search and rescue efforts. At the same time, it was this absent state that became present later on, during the massive protests on August 8, when people gathered to ask for accountability and justice (PHOTO 2). Close to the square where thousands of protesters gathered, two massive grain silos damaged by the explosion stood as testimony for the absent bodies that could no longer protest. The demonstrators were immediately met by a repressive army with tear gas, rubber bullets, and pallets. The dust and the debris of the explosion were replaced by the choking smell of teargas and bullets from the army “greeting” the enraged crowds. A state that clearly besieged the Weberian mantra and exercised its monopoly over violence against its citizens.

In the weeks that followed, sounds of Beirut in recovery and reconstruction filled the soundscape. Hours and hours on end, one could hear the constant sound of glass being cleaned from the streets, from the houses, from the flesh. Thus, gradually, we discovered that our mental maps of Beirut no longer coincided with the desolate urban scenery before our eyes (PHOTO 3). Among cleaning hundreds of book and photographic archives at the Arab Image Foundation, together with distributing food and clothing at MJO (Mouvement de la Jeunesse Orthodoxe) social-medical center, I could see glimpses of the Lebanese army and police going from house to house, diligently assessing the losses incurred by Beirutis. This was all in the vague hope of a future state compensation. The few who had the financial possibilities rebuilt their houses. Yet, they were the lucky ones. The rest were left with asking themselves how they could rebuild their homes during an unprecedented financial crisis, when their dollar savings were frozen by the banks, the price of the dollar was soaring, and the rainy season was just around the



corner. Meanwhile, Facebook videos recorded by individuals and cameras seconds before the explosion were shared on social media. We were stuck in a temporal loop. Seconds turned into endless minutes of reliving the blast again and again, as anger increased again and again.

It was not out of the blue. The August 4 blast was such a surreal event that it has been difficult for each one of us to include it into our structural mechanisms of meaning-making. Channeling the cultural anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, how foreign can a foreign element be to still make sense in structures of meaning? Yet, be not deceived as this surreal event had clear and real genealogies. Extracting it from the networks of eroding corruption, indifference, and sectarian politics will only contribute to absolving the guilt of those who need to be held accountable for this tragic event. Tribal politics reinforced by a sectarian regime that has replicated itself in a temporal limbo since the Civil War. A ruling system of no checks and balances, where nepotism is so ordinary that exceptions are to be praised as extraordinary. A Ponzi scheme that plunged Lebanon into a financial crisis looming but never really expected. The blast has a very clear genealogy grounded in eroded, corrupt political sectors, in a port nicknamed “Aladin’s Cave” for its mafia-like business, and in a sectarian system that feeds off fears of war and conflict. All these systemic cracks made it possible for 2750 tonnes to sit in improper conditions for seven years in the port of Beirut and to implode on August 4, leaving marks in the bodies, homes, and memories of Beirutis.

It is mere survival or emigration. In anthropology, we talk a lot about the agency of the individual, his or her ability to act within structures of meaning and power, through choice, language, and action. This blast allowed no agency to its victims. No agency over their bodies, their homes, their lives, their futures. Two weeks after August 4, Beirut is flooded with large posters inscribed with aspirational messages like “Beirut will survive,” and tired tropes of Beirut rising from the ashes like a Phoenix. Yet, I cannot help but think that these tropes of survival and rebirth are misleading. The aim here is not to survive. The aim is to have a safe standard of living supported by financial and social stability. The aim is to be able to offer one’s children a chance for a safe environment to grow and thrive. When did we get complacent with just survival? Also, the survival and resurrection of Beirut from its ashes is just a metaphoric illusion, hiding the gradual erosion of a collective will that finds comfort in emigration and resignation. Moreover, these optimistic tropes do not address the core of the problem, the reasons that Beirut burnt in the first place and continues to burn. This rising again and again from the ashes is not a success story, but rather an anxiety-inducing feeling of being stuck in a horror story on repeat.

Epilogue. My two-year fieldwork in Lebanon was supposed to go smoothly. Smooth like my IRB approval since my research posed minimal risk to my interlocutors. Observe religious rituals, interview members of the Rum Orthodox community in Beirut, and engage in theological conversations about bodily piety and sacred aesthetics. Traveling to Lebanon on and off since 2016, I was accustomed to fluctuating periods of socio-economic precarity and brittle stability. I learnt how to navigate networks of sectarian services, gender discrimination, racial profiling, and Lebanese social customs. At the same time, I developed a network of interlocutors, friends, and acquaintances who mediated my access to rich insights into the intimacy of everyday life. These insights allowed me to engage with my field beyond and along Western orientalist discourses on the “banality of violence”² in the Middle East, narratives of an overarching Islamic fundamentalism, and the so-called “lost causes” of secular states in the area. Then, starting with October 2019, my research was gradually impacted by disrupting events that resulted in entangled layers of precarity, both in my field and my positionality as a researcher. These disruptions triggered methodological and ethical adjustments that brought along questions that I did not envision when I boarded my plane to Beirut in 2018. How do anthropologists conduct research in periods of intense instability and in various contexts of conflict? How do we relate to our interlocutors as protesters, victims, bystanders? How do we negotiate our research activities, social

justice ethos, and willingness to help? When do we say stop and leave the field? How do we navigate a precarious temporality, when the past is disputed in the streets and the present reflects future frustrations, insecurities, and challenges?

During the nationwide protests of October 2019, in reaction to an imminent financial crisis and to the corruption of a tribal-sectarian political elite, streets were flooded by Lebanese protesters. Public spaces turned into topographies of protest, chants of national unity and sectarian condemnation dominated the soundscapes of Beirut and other major cities, revived memories of the civil war incited to violence and bloodshed, and the first “martyrs of the “October intifada” emerged (PHOTOS 4 AND 5). As I documented the unfolding of these protests, I chanted with the thousands, learned anti-establishments songs, choked with tear-gas, and smelled onion to reduce its effects (PHOTO 6). Then, in March 2020, the COVID-19 virus started infecting weakened and exhausted bodies and the country gradually entered in one of its many lockdowns. The soundscape of demonstrations was replaced by the silence of isolation. The proximity of protesting was swapped with the safe distance of 1.5 meters. As I adjusted my research methodology to ensure the safety of my interlocutors and myself, I engaged in voluntary work at the MJO social-medical center, the same place where I had been conducting research. I distributed frozen fish, packed food, allocated medicine, and assessed family and community needs. Then, after the August 4 explosion, I cleaned shattered glass from the photographic collections at the Arab Image Foundation, the same collections I had touched a year before for my archival research.

Amidst all these precarious disruptions, I had to constantly negotiate my multi-layered identity as a researcher, a victim, and a friend. For me, the dilemma of interference in the field was no dilemma at all. Instead, I dealt with the implications of being a researcher with a community-based approach, whose presence in the field is defined at the intersection of personal health, social commitments for a better world, and ethical obligations as an anthropologist. This approach has allowed me to gain intimate insights into the street-level reverberations of macro-structure phenomena. But at what cost? Scars on my body and scars on my mental health. And yet, a question lingers: How can I reflect hope in my anthropological work on presents of despair?³ This is a question I still struggle with as I start to lay down on paper the results of my two-year research in Lebanon.

Roxana Maria Aras, PhD candidate
University of Michigan Anthropology and History Program
 aroxana@umich.edu

² Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 3.

³ Hiba Bou Akar, “The Search for Hope,” *Society + Space*, Aug. 31, 2020.



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By Mekarem Eljamal

CMENAS caught up with **Nessma Bashi**, a dual University of Michigan alumna, who earned a BA in International Studies and Modern Middle Eastern and North African Studies in 2013 and returned to U-M to complete her JD in 2018.

After finishing her BA, Bashi moved to Jordan to intern with the King Hussein Foundation's Information and Research Center. During her time at the center, Bashi's work focused on civil society and obstacles facing the country's marginalized communities. Outside of the office, Bashi also engaged with these communities by teaching English in a refugee camp through Jesuit Refugee Services. It was these experiences, both with communities and in a structured research environment, that reaffirmed her decision to pursue law as a career.

"So, two years after leaving Ann Arbor, I returned to University of Michigan as a law student and began my career in international law," she said. "Law school was a difficult journey, to say the least, but I'm grateful for all the doors MLaw opened for me."

Many of those doors led to work that built upon her previous international experiences. Bashi interned at two United Nations agencies, defended refugee claimants in Canada, and clerked for two federal judges.

"Those positions helped me land my first post-grad legal position: providing legal aid to refugees on a Greek island called Lesbos. After that, I spent some time in the Appeals Chamber of the International Criminal Court," Bashi said. "Now I'm a fellow at the Syria Justice and Accountability Center."

Bashi reflects fondly upon all of her work experiences, each of which exposed her to different legal systems and taught her valuable skills. Though she expresses satisfaction about her past positions, Bashi would not return to all of them, emphasizing an important lesson on the need to recognize how you can, and often will, grow out of positions.

Knowledge and critical thinking are never outgrown, and Bashi's education in Middle Eastern and North African studies continues to serve her well.

"All the social, political, and cultural knowledge I acquired from my courses helps me to contextualize my surroundings when I do fieldwork," she said. "It also helps me to put forward substantive and informed written material reflecting critical thinking and empathy."

For Bashi, coursework in Middle Eastern and North African studies provided a much-needed nuanced understanding of the region.

"It's easy to read books about the Middle East and to know facts," Bashi explains. "But to dive into the complexities of such a beautiful region—from its history to its religions to its poetry—allowed me to view the Middle East in a more holistic way."

While completing her JD, Bashi had the opportunity to be on the other side of the classroom, teaching students as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) for a course on the intersections of philosophy and law. Her happy recollections have kept open the option of returning to academia as a faculty member.

"My favorite part of law school was being a GSI. The students opened my eyes to different perspectives and inspired me to be a better person," Bashi said. "I would be privileged to experience that again."

In the meantime, Bashi continues to put her law degree to use as she works towards a career goal of being involved in transitional justice initiatives around Syria.

"I'm an Iraqi-American, but Syria holds a special place in my heart," she said. "Perpetrators of human rights violations must be held accountable, and the harms caused to victims should be repaired. I would like to help facilitate that process."

With all the phenomenal work experiences Bashi has had over the years, sometimes she still gets caught in cycles of thoughts that question her right, desire, and capability to pursue the career goals that she has.

"I spent so much time as a student feeling insecure about my capacity and capabilities. Sometimes, it felt like everyone reached their goals before I did," she said. "After all these years, I still work on silencing the negative voice in my brain that tells me I'm not good enough."

She wants current students to take a lesson from her own experiences and push back against the imposter syndrome.

"Run your own race! Don't get caught up in comparing yourself to others," Bashi said. "The sooner you cut the negative self-talk and appreciate your individuality, the happier you'll be down the road."

DR. RENEE RANDALL ADDS TO THE DEPTH OF MENA STUDIES FACULTY AT U-M

U-M hires emerging scholars of the Middle East and North Africa. In 2020, as part of the LSA Collegiate Fellows Program, an initiative aiming to build up the college's pool of scholars committed to diversity and inclusivity, **Dr. Renée Randall** came to U-M. CMENAS is honored to list her amongst our affiliated faculty. Here she discusses her research and teaching.

CMENAS: What prompted your interests in the Middle East, and why did you choose to go into academia after having worked at the State Department?

Renée Randall: As a senior in college, I was fairly certain that a career in international relations was for me. It seemed the optimal way to channel my interest in politics, culture, languages, and history—and it was a decision I had discussed at length with family, including an older cousin who had been one of the few black American diplomats with the United Nations.

It was as a Foreign Service Officer that I was introduced to the Middle East, specifically the Maghreb and the Gulf. After some time, however, I realized

that I was less interested in advancing U.S. foreign policy than I was in understanding the profound historical and cultural undercurrents that shape the contemporary political scene in certain parts of the world.

CMENAS: How would you describe your research interests, and why were you drawn to them?

RR: In general terms, I am interested in cultural representations of how violent conflict between civilians impacts both the individual and national psyche. By “cultural representations,” I mean largely literature and the visual arts (film and art). Among other things, the militarization of civilians makes violence incredibly intimate. It has the potential to disrupt social, moral, and political

codes of coexistence for decades. While political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists are also interested in this phenomenon, I'm interested in a very specific angle: the narratives that society comes up with during and after a period of militarization. How do they help shed light on the sense of self, the notion of the political, and the possibility of the communal?

CMENAS: Why is unpacking the idea of trauma, its manipulation, and its deployment so important to understanding both the Middle East and the world writ large?

RR: Put simply: because trauma—that which triggers it, as well as our responses to it—ultimately conditions the way we see ourselves, each other, and the worlds we inhabit. Moreover, a community's narrative about its history, its present, and its future can often be shaped, in part, by narrative interpretations of trauma passed down through generations. It is also reinvested with significance under new conditions. Understanding the origin stories of nationalisms, the vehemence

of political propaganda, and the rage of minoritized communities requires that we sit with interpretations of trauma and the consequences that manifest.

CMENAS: As part of the postdoc, you're working on your project, *Mad Archives of the Lebanese Civil War*. Can you expand on the idea behind this project? What has thus far been a memorable part of the research and writing process?

RR: *Mad Archives* is a project that grew out of an act of observation: as I started to read novels in Arabic and French, published during the early years of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990), a few texts, in particular, made a strong impression on me because of their explicit evocation of madness as both cause and effect of the conflict. I started to trace the idea of madness throughout literature, film, and art produced about the war. I realized that the definition of madness seemed to change over time, reflecting both the medium of cultural representation as well as the ongoing impact of the war and, ultimately, its legacy. The matter of legacy is crucial: on one of my research trips to Lebanon, I had the opportunity to sit down with a former combatant. Seated at his dining room table with his family, I listened as he attempted to explain his memories, thoughts, and feelings—his speech often failing him altogether. I later learned this was the first time his children had heard him speak of the war.

CMENAS: Some of your other research goes beyond the Middle East to touch on other regions in the world. What prompted you to engage with themes of trauma and moral injury from a transnational perspective? What added value does this transnational approach provide?

RR: As a postdoctoral fellow (and as of 2022, Assistant Professor), I am based largely out of the Department of Comparative Literature. As a comparativist, we are trained to think about themes and concepts across

“[W]e are simultaneously acknowledging the particular forces of histories, moments, and actors while also noting shared features in order to understand something greater about the theme or concept we are investigating.”

multiple geographic and geopolitical contexts. It is a careful balancing act: we are simultaneously acknowledging the particular forces of histories, moments, and actors while also noting shared features in order to understand something greater about the theme or concept we are investigating. In my case, I do this through my work on Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

CMENAS: Turning to teaching, what do you hope undergraduate students get from your “Global Narratives of Trauma” course?

RR: As frustrating as this may sound to my current and future students, I want this course to raise more questions than it answers!

“Trauma” is a concept that is very hard to grasp, regardless of the disciplinary orientation from which one approaches it. In this class, I start with an orientation to the concept from a Euro-American lens since it is this perspective that has become (and continues to be) hegemonic as a result of centuries of imperialism and what we call “globalization.” After establishing this theoretical orientation, we turn to literary narratives of trauma from around the world. Through these



narratives, we investigate how we might reposition our understanding of trauma in ways that overturn, complement, challenge or extend the hegemonic view. How might we arrive at a more capacious framework for understanding the relationship between the individual psyche, the body, and the community?

CMENAS: What other courses do you hope to design and teach at U-M?

RR: Plenty! I will offer “Global Narratives of Trauma” again in the fall of 2021. In the coming years, I plan to offer courses on madness and the asylum in Middle Eastern literature and a class on Nobel prize-winning literature.

CMENAS: Anything you would like to add?

RR: A note of encouragement to anyone who is interested in an academic or career track that will require the study of language: it is never “too late” to learn, no matter what anyone tells you. Though I learned Spanish and French as a child, I didn't learn Arabic until I was an adult, and I am actively continuing to grow in my abilities. It is undoubtedly hard (and sometimes very frustrating) work, but it is not impossible.

LIKE THE FATEMEH MORADI'S JOURNEY FROM AFGHANISTAN TO THE UNITED STATES MOVIES

I want to share from my heart my immigration story that is very similar to this film. *Midnight Traveler* (2019)

is not only a documentary film that shows a story of a family's migration, but it also is the story of millions of Afghans who flee Afghanistan each year because it is not a safe place to live anymore.

Because of the Soviet-Afghan war, my family moved to Iran when I was four years old. I went to an elementary school there at the age of six. We were supposed to return to our home country, Afghanistan, after the war. That conflict lasted more than nine years, starting in December of 1979. Many people were killed during this war, and millions of Afghans fled the country as refugees. Even after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1998, the civil war began, and then the Taliban came in, and Afghanistan experienced war after war. As such, my family decided to stay in Iran as refugees.

I remember that we faced challenges for being refugees in Iran. Although I had very good teachers and professors, and friends there, the policies applied for refugees were just like immigration legislation in other parts of the world. After I got a Bachelor's degree, I had to make a decision either to stay in Iran without any job and a real life I deserved or to return to Afghanistan where I could make my life. I did not have any good images of my home country even after the Taliban left, yet I decided to return to Kabul and make my life there. I left Iran in 2012 and had a couple of temporary jobs. I was very careful to not hang out very much. I could join my friends to go to Art Café (Café Honar in Dari) to have tea and cake and

CMENAS Note:

In the fall of 2020, thanks to generous Title VI funding from the US Department of Education, we partnered with the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor to provide virtual movie tickets to "Midnight Traveler." Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, community members, faculty, and students from across the world watched the movie. Angela Palumbo, Chair of the International Studies A.S. degree program and of the English as a Second Language Department at Tompkins Cortland Community College, and her colleague at the college Christina Stavenhagen-Helgren, Professor of Anthropology and Sociology, shared this reflection penned by their student, **Fatemeh Moradi**.

listen to live music after work. I used to go to that café in 2014, but as soon as it was threatened by the Taliban, my friends and I refused to go there anymore. We knew that the café was threatened because women had more freedom there. I met some of the young filmmakers and artists there, including Hassan Fazili; however, he is just my Facebook friend since we did not have a chance to meet in person.

In 2014, I established an NGO named Educational Support and Development Organization of Afghanistan (ESDOA), and it focuses on bringing educational opportunities to rural Afghans, especially for women. Meanwhile, I was working

on my application to continue my education in the United States. Finally, I was granted admission to the United States in 2019 and came here to study Women and Gender Studies at Tompkins Cortland Community College near Ithaca, NY.

After watching the documentary film *Midnight Traveler*, directed by Hassan Fazili, I can relate to the film since my family fled to Iran when Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union and was not safe anymore. I remember waiting at the border to be accepted by the UNHCR for safe asylum in Iran. I remember that I was just like Zahra, playing with other kids around our tent at the camp at the border of Iran. I see that children are all the same worldwide. They laugh, dance, get bored, and they understand the situation they are in: they understand gangs, they experience fear, they learn how to survive. Sometimes they even have to steal food or fruit when they are hungry! They play and they do not care where they are or what is going on in the world. Later, when I grew up, my mother told me that she was very worried about reaching our destination safely.

I can also observe gender norms in Afghan women in this film when the woman talks about her hijab or she tries to cover her breast with her small scarf! I understand when they face danger, and they struggle to find a word in English: HELP! I have heard this word hundreds of times.

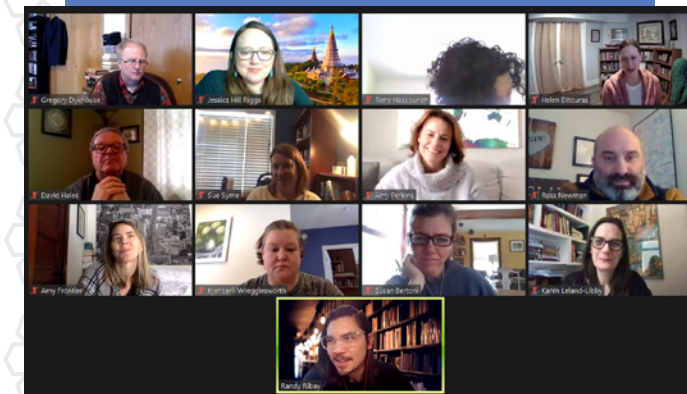
[The Fazili family's] journey had started from Mazar-e-Sharif. I know that city because I took the risk of traveling there twice. Then they passed through Iran, where I grew up. I could feel the entire film with my heart because it was what I can relate to most of my life as a migrant.

Hassan Fazili became a filmmaker (rather than a mullah), and that is much more helpful to change people's opinions, perspectives, and lives. All humans need and deserve to live in a peaceful place. Women especially should have the right to choose their lifestyles and have freedom. I know so many "Midnight Travelers" and I hope that they can reach the peaceful places they deserve! It was one of the best films I have ever watched about migration and its risks and the policies that put human lives in danger. I am hoping that this film contributes to changing immigration policies worldwide!

Author's Note: *I want to thank my professor and adviser, Angela Palumbo, deeply for what she taught and encouraged me during this semester in the course "Intercultural Communication"! Without her help, I would not be able to have a different and knowledgeable look at this film regarding migration, gender, and different cultures and communication. And, I appreciate Professor Christina Stavenhagen-Helgren for her help and connecting me to the Michigan Theater for this great opportunity!*

MENA-SEA Teacher Program hosts Randy Ribay

By Kristin Waterbury



On March 13, 2021, the current cohort of the MENA-SEA Teacher Program was delighted to host Randy Ribay. The award-winning author of *Patron Saints of Nothing*, Ribay spoke to the group about his book, which discusses themes of family, faith, and immigrant identity. Teachers in the current cohort were given copies of the book as part of their participation in the program and were encouraged to integrate Ribay's novel into their curricula. In addition to this year's cohort of teachers, Helen Ditouras from Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan, and Amy Perkins and Greg Dykhouse from the 2019-20 MENA-SEA cohort, attended.

The [MENA-SEA Teacher Program](#) is a ten-month program training a cohort of Grade 6-14 educators to deepen their understanding and appreciation of religious and cultural diversity in the two regions of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Southeast Asia (SEA).

A HICCUP, A PRINCE, AND AN EYEPATCH

By Rima Hassouneh

Who is the prince of enchantment?

What is Winston's hiccup, otherwise known as Churchill's sneeze? And why is the statue of Umm Kalthoum in Cairo wearing an eye patch? These and many other Jeopardy-like questions were posed on Friday, January 22nd, by CMENAS graduate student Mekarem Eljamal. (*Keep reading for the answers!*)

She was speaking on behalf of CMENAS to 59 employees of General Mills (GM), the maker of Wheaties, Cheerios, and Nature Valley granola bars, amongst other kitchen staples, and at the invitation of the Asian Leadership Network, a group of GM employees organizing monthly activities of cultural enrichment for company employees. The first month in the new year was dedicated to the Middle East and North Africa. Since GM's headquarters are located in a suburb of Minneapolis, and since CMENAS has been conducting work remotely for almost a year, Eljamal prepared and virtually delivered an overview about regional diversity, highlighting history, geography, languages, religions, cuisine, art and architecture, and music.

One of the event's main outcomes was to dispel Arabo-centric understandings of the vast region. The nation-states of Turkey, Iran, and Israel are not Arab, Eljamal pointed out, and neither is the Nubian population of southern Egypt. Even within one regional language there is much variety, she said. Many North African dialects of Arabic contain Tamazight, the languages of the indigenous Amazigh. And many languages and Arabic dialects linguistically reflect the influences of Ottoman, French, and British rule. In fact, the less geographically proximate two dialects are, the less their mutual intelligibility. Noting the colonial legacies in the two regions, Eljamal drew the audience's attention to the arbitrariness of countries' borders. (Winston Churchill, legend has it, sneezed while demarcating Jordan's in 1921, accounting for its sharp, jerky lines on the map.)

Displaying a collection of unlabeled photographs of various cityscapes and natural areas, Eljamal then invited her audience to guess the locations; the point was to challenge popular perceptions of a monolithic and monocultural region. Far from being desolate and lifeless places, human dwellings and habitats have interacted with natural landscapes in the form of ski resorts (Iran and Lebanon), irrigating marshes (Iraq), and windcatchers (Yemen, Morocco, and Egypt). In an illustration of pluralistic belief and practice within Abrahamic religions, the audience saw photos of historic synagogues in Shiraz, Alexandria, and Beirut, amongst other houses of worship.

True to form, the General Mills crowd reacted most volubly to the mouthwatering culinary traditions of the two regions. In the Chat feature, they listed foods they loved (shawarma, tabouli, hummus, and baklava), recommending their favorite joints. With respect to staples, rice predominates in the Middle East, Eljamal informed them, due to historic trade routes with Asia, but

couscous (a pasta made from semolina) is the popular ingredient in North African tagines. Tantalizing pictures of khaliyat al-nahel (Yemen) and saffron rice pudding (Iran) excited questions about the best Minneapolis eateries serving these desserts. Happily, Eljamal assured, there is yet another option, in Michigan: Dearborn's [Shatila Bakery](#). It ships its delectables all over the country.

In her section about architecture, Eljamal explained that, contrary to notions of stereotypical chaos, the lay-outs of old cities followed rhyme and reason. Urban environments, in fact, were designed and regulated for facility of travel by foot, animal-drawn carriages, and other modes of transportation. An array of images demonstrated the contrast between architectural traditions and innovations: the protective walls, main gates, and narrow alleys of Cairo and Fez; the skyscrapers of the "instacities" of Dubai and Abu Dhabi; and the *corniches* and beaches of Beirut.

No presentation about cultural production would have been complete without art, and Eljamal introduced the large-scale mural art of El-Seed, a French-Tunisian artist, who employs calligraphy on "canvases" of city buildings. Working in black-and-white photography and videography to produce stark contrast, Iranian artist Shirin Neshat explores themes of gender-based oppression and political manipulation of religion.

A few examples of musical instruments were displayed, too: The ney or nay, a reed wind instrument popular in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey. Traditionally carved from wood, tablas have drum heads made from goat skin. Sagat, one-hole finger cymbals played by musicians and dancers. And then there is the oud, so culturally emblematic of the Middle East, according to the [May/June 2020 issue](#) of AramcoWorld, that "it is often called *amir al-tarab*, 'the prince of enchantment' in a musical sense." On the contemporary side, Alsarah &

Eljamal prepared and virtually delivered [to General Mills employees] an overview about regional diversity, highlighting history, geography, languages, religions, cuisine, art and architecture, and music.

the Nubatones compose and perform East-African Retro-Pop music. The Jewish sister group A-WA have become famous with their mix of Yemeni traditional music and hip-hop. Sung in the Yemenite dialect of Judeo-Arabic, their 2016 "Habib Galbi" went viral in the Muslim world, and became the first song in Arabic to hit No. 1 on the Israeli pop charts.

The General Mills' audience members were also introduced to the musical giants Fairuz and Umm Kulthum, whose artistic and cultural influences and standing extend far beyond the borders of their respective home countries of Lebanon and Egypt. Umm Kulthum's songs were operatic, pan-Arab, and nationalistic. AramcoWorld's [January/February 2012 issue](#) states, "Her music is as much a part of the Cairo streetscape as the warm, exhaust-laden air and the ubiquitous desert dust..." So beloved and evocative was she that her funeral in 1975 drew crowds larger than President Gamal Abdel Nasser's. Several decades after the death of the legendary "queen," Umm Kulthum's representation of Egypt's modern history and people endures. Protesting the shootings of civilians' eyes by Egypt's Security Council of Armed Forces in 2011, demonstrators bandaged one of the eyes of her statue in central Cairo.

CMENAS' presentation received an outpouring of applause and acclaim from GM's employees, and the center looks forward to diversifying and strengthening its outreach to the food manufacturer and to other leading businesses.



PUJA MULLINS

JOYFUL AND EXACTLY WHERE SHE'S "MEANT TO BE"

By Rima Hassouneh

Our center salutes all teachers, who have been valiantly and heroically attending to their students' learning and psycho-social needs in these extraordinary times. We shine a spotlight on **Puja Mullins**, who is the Grade K–12 English Language (EL) coordinator, and a Grade K–5 EL teacher, at Lincoln Consolidated Schools (LCS) in Ypsilanti, Michigan, where she has worked since 2015.

I met Ms. Mullins when I was invited to interpret for Arabic-speaking parents at a virtual family event, "Parents' Tea Talk," on December 16, 2020. Lincoln Consolidated Schools educate children of families hailing from all "corners" of the earth, including Vietnam, Laos, Yemen, and Peru. About 30 students and their parents clustered about screens and tuned into the evening to celebrate the children's accomplishments and to learn what to expect during this unusual school year in terms of homework, grades, etc. On that evening, I also interpreted for Kerry Martin, staff attorney at the Michigan Immigrant Rights Center, about legal rights.

Asked what she loves about teaching, Ms. Mullins recounts a formative and powerful memory. During her childhood, her family moved from Bangladesh to Qatar, where her father took a job as a civil engineer. One day he came home with a giant chalkboard and set it against the wall. Excited to use it, the young Mullins went around to the neighbors, asking for words in their many languages. She wrote these—marhaba ("hello" in Arabic), kalikukka ("play" in Malayalam), shukriya ("thanks" in Hindi), and annyeong ("goodbye" in Korean)—on the board and "taught" them to her siblings and parents. Sharing new knowledge, she discovered, brought her joy. Eventually, she obtained a Master of Arts with Elementary Teacher Certification from U-M's School of Education, and in 2018 completed a second graduate degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at EMU. "I am exactly where I am meant to be. And I am never done learning!" she says.

Ms. Mullins loves witnessing students "see themselves as learners and thinkers." One of the highlights of her teaching career began with a field trip to local restaurants organized in 2019 as part of her summer program for K-12 students. Positioning students as the "digital" generation, Ms. Mullins designed both independent and collaborative learning tasks over a platform created by U-M's Center for Digital

Mullins hopes for professional training in cultural competency to better understand families' cultures and norms and to serve psycho-social needs.

Beyond the "basics" of food and rent, what are the questions, she wonders, a family "is not comfortable asking teachers and administrators? How to prepare their child for college? Bring a relative to the U.S.? I want to be proactive in helping my families."

Curricula—Collablify Roadmaps—which housed annotatable mentor texts, multilingual videos and chunked responses, to scaffold an understanding of the various genres of writing that students would ultimately produce throughout her summer program. After this outing, in a series of extramural activities and assignments selected according to individual interests, students interviewed "funds of knowledge," family members who had immigrated to this country. Other students created a book of recipes including ones for Eid, or conducted interviews of peers positioned as experts on the foods (maraqe, arroz con leche, samosa, and more!) of the countries under study. The students were charged with "letting the world know about this dish," explains Ms. Mullins. Still other students chose to write biographical essays about restaurant owners and servers, or reviews for future customers. The assignments were "lots of fun, but also authentic and real-world."

Usually, Ms. Mullins travels between LCS buildings to connect with students during the school day. ("I see myself in them.") Out of concern for parents' equitable access, she rotates her meetings with them between different buildings. And she prepares and implements multi-cultural literacy events focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Various populations, including "newcomers as well as U.S.-born children who are heritage speakers," often get "lumped"

under English Learners, yet they all have different needs. Understandably, Ms. Mullins says, teachers can tend to focus exclusively on addressing students' academic development. She hopes for professional training in cultural competency to better understand families' cultures and norms and to serve psycho-social needs. Beyond the "basics" of food and rent, what are the questions, she wonders, a family "is not comfortable asking teachers and administrators? How to prepare their child for college? Bring a relative to the U.S.? I want to be proactive in helping my families."

Ms. Mullins' passion for teaching was celebrated when LCS Superintendent Robert (Bob) Jansen joined "Parents' Tea Talk" to announce surprising but well-deserved congratulations: Ms. Mullins had been named "Teacher of the Month"! "It feels good to be seen, to be recognized in front of all my families," she replies to my question about her reaction. But the light shines really on students and their families. Her own family immigrated to Canada when she was 11, and Ms. Mullins is keenly aware that the voices of many immigrant and refugee parents are all too often not heard. "It is a tremendous privilege to work with families and to speak up for them," she says.

4TH ANNUAL MLK DAY LECTURE

By Kristin Waterbury

On Monday, February 8, 2021, CMENAS and the Global Islamic Studies Center co-hosted the Fourth Annual MLK Day Lecture, “Decolonizing Methods: Nubia and the Politics of Knowledge.” Our panelists included Professors Yasmin Moll, Geoff Emberling, and Michael Fahy, who discussed strategies for decolonizing knowledge about Nubia at the fraught intersections of race, politics, and history in the Global South. Our event also featured a performance of a beautiful Nubian folktale by the daughter-and-mother duo Nabra Nelson and Mona-Sherif Nelson. Nubians are an internally diverse ethnolinguistic community whose historical homeland is located along the Nile River in southern Egypt and northern Sudan; the performance highlighted the importance of folktales in preserving Nubian history.



Yasmin Moll addresses why talk about Nubia in relation to MLK.

CMENAS' MLK Day Event begins with a performance by Nabra Nelson & Mona Sherif-Nelson.



Geoff Emberling, of U-M's Kelsey Museum, discusses a collaborative project about sub-Saharan Africa's earliest empire, Kush.



Michael Fahy speaks about the Nubia Odyssey project, which aims to cultivate empathy across cultures.



Panelists from the 4th Annual MLK Day Lecture take questions from the audience.

C

MENAS is dedicated to promoting a broader and deeper understanding of the region—its histories, cultures, languages, and people—through research, education, and outreach programs.

The center is committed to creating a supportive environment where scholars, educators, students, and the community have the opportunity to engage in dialogue and to study current and historical events related to the Middle East and North Africa.

CMENAS gifts help support internships, student groups, faculty and student travel, workshops and lectures, visiting scholars, artists and performers, and special courses related to the Middle East and North Africa.

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Weiser Hall
500 Church Street, Suite 500
Ann Arbor, Michigan
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