Title
Diary of a Graduate Student: The Seasonal Musings of an Aspiring Academic

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It was like the Oscars. I found myself on a podium accepting a teaching award from a distinguished group of professors and community member all-stars, thanking everyone from the academy (of academics) to my family for setting me on a path towards vocational fulfillment and personal growth. Sound like a plug advertising the merits of teaching? Well, it is. As professors in training, my graduate school colleagues and I are in a unique position to help transition undergraduates to a more collegiate atmosphere. With one leg lazily dangling in the world of perpetual student-hood and the other busily pacing in the realm of pedagogical training, grading, office hours and departmental meetings, as graduate students, we are in-between. Able to empathize with both students and professors, we can take a more holistic approach to fostering the student/professor dynamic, even making friends of the students we mentor.

**Spring 2010**

But, back to the award that changed my life. It was last spring that the Center for the Study of Women honored me with the Constance Coiner Award for teaching students about my research on Middle Eastern and Muslim women writers immigrating to the U.S. The award recognizes a commitment to instructing undergraduates about gender and class issues in celebration of Constance Coiner, the much accomplished UCLA Ph.D. and author of Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur, who tragically died in the 1996 TWA plane crash, alongside her daughter, Anna Duarte Coiner. Truthfully, I was so stunned to receive an award in her honor, and amongst so many other talented women at the ceremony, that in the moment, I didn’t anticipate the many doors that it would later open for me.
Just after the ceremony, Mr. Santiago Bernal approached me from the Academic Advancement Program (a program for which I have had the privilege of teaching these past three summers) to meet with a group of visiting educators from South Africa and the Netherlands. These universities were setting up similar programs to AAP in their respective countries and using AAP as a teaching model. If you are unfamiliar with AAP, it is a multiracial program, which dedicates itself to assisting, mentoring, instructing and retaining students from underrepresented and underprivileged backgrounds at UCLA. Most of my students from past years were the first from their families to attend university and/or to overcome numerous obstacles in the pursuit of their college education. My experience has shown me that most of these students were anxious to break through racial barriers and my summer course discussing postcolonial fiction, ethnic-American identity, and racial prejudice became an extremely personal experience for us all.

This is precisely what the South Africans and Dutch wanted to achieve through their sister programs, which continue to promote equality and educational opportunity for first generation minorities in their respective countries. The goal is to foster cross-cultural dialogue between a country’s majority population and its minority groups. During my summer class, we often found common ground as ethnic Americans and talked about what it meant to be American in a post-9/11 world defined by the Patriot Act, military campaigns, and economic turmoil.

Though AAP addresses and assists all underrepresented minorities, most of my students had been Latina/os and African Americans. I always wondered what it would be like to teach a classroom of students who came from a similar background as my own; whose parents emigrated to North America or Western Europe from a Middle Eastern and/or Muslim country, as mine did. Last summer, I was given that chance.

After I met with the visiting Dutch administrators from the Vrije University in Amsterdam, I worked with the very dedicated Associate Director of AAP, Donald Wasson, to create and orchestrate a new opportunity to guest lecture for the Dutch program via satellite during the initiation of their program.

### Summer 2010

During the beginning of the summer, I spent many Skype sessions with my Dutch contact and now good friend, Gusta, to plan my guest lecture in her class. Because my daily composition course for AAP’s Freshman Summer Program conflicted with the duration of the VU class, I Skyped in the mornings before my own course began. I lectured twice for her class: the first session briefly introduced the key concepts of Edward Said’s Orientalism and the second discussed Arab-American writer, Mohja Kahf’s poetic works. The students, primarily from North Africa, showed much interest in reading about the Muslim American experience, and especially engaged me about my experiences, which I had not anticipated. My Iranian heritage informs my research about Middle Eastern women’s autobiographies and inspires discussions about hybridized identity in the U.S. During the question-and-answer portion of my final lecture, I exchanged stories with the students from Vrije, wherein I discovered that we shared comparable experiences and similar perspectives. I was touched by their personal accounts and questions, which mostly dealt with Euro-American anxieties.
about Muslims. Additionally, since my course discussed auto/biographical narratives, both my students and the Dutch students interviewed each other through email, social networking sites, and instant messaging programs to write a biographical essay about their partner. Many of the Vrije students talked about how they struggled to integrate and adapt to Dutch culture, or about prejudice against Muslims, while others spoke about new friends and opportunities they encountered. But what surprised most of my students was how much they had in common with their Vrije partners, though they did not share the same ethnicity, religion, or national identity.

Fall 2010

The success of our collaborative efforts inspired Gusta, Donald, and I to plan a second exchange between UCLA and Vrije University instructors and students in the summer of 2011. I still hear from some of the first-generation Dutch students on occasion and marvel at their strength and determination to dispel racial and religious prejudices. After many discussions with Gusta and her students, it became clear that the Netherlands still has some ways to go in terms of racial equality and social acceptance of its minorities (but then again, so do we). I admire my friend for taking on this challenge, as it is an ongoing fight not just for her in her country but for us in ours as well.

Winter 2011

After several years of teaching, each moment still feels electrifying and the impetus to create a unique experience in my class motivates me to draw on my many selves: the aspiring academic, the graduate student, the painter, the college radio DJ, the musician, the yoga enthusiast, and the avid world traveler, to thread my personal experiences and reflections into the fabric of my courses. Just as my teaching style incorporates the facets of my life, it also draws upon the sum of my experiences. Without the Constance Coiner Award, Mr. Bernal would have never approached me precisely during the time the Dutch educators were visiting. Without that recognition, I would not have met my now-dear friend Gusta, with whom I have had the pleasure of exchanging pedagogical experiences, strategies, and philosophies. Because of my interaction with the diverse, first-generation Dutch students at Vrije University last summer, I was impassioned to design and teach a course for the Comparative Literature Department this term, entitled Comedic Masks, Tragic Faces: Investigating Arab and Iranian Immigrant Women’s Life Narratives, which features my dissertation research about Middle Eastern women writers. Currently, with protests spreading from North Africa to the Middle East, the class is turning into a dynamic and organic experience inspired by the headlines. What motivates contemporary forms of resistance and revolution and how are they sustained? Twenty students and I are determined to find out.

Leila Pazargadi advanced to candidacy and received her concentration in Women’s Studies in the spring of 2009. Her dissertation discusses the comparative works of Iranian American and Arab American women writers who are publishing autobiographical fiction and nonfiction in a post-9/11 America.