



International Muslim Graduate Students in the U.S. as Cultural Agents of Peace: Experiences of Al-Rihla, Stereotypes, and Cross-Culture Communication

LES ETUDIANTS INTERNATIONAUX DIPLOMES MUSULMANES AUX ETATS-UNIS ETANT DES AGENTS CULTURELS DE LA PAIX: EXPERIENCES D'AL-RIHLA, LES STEREOTYPES ET L'ECHANGE DE LA COMMUNICATION CULTURELLE

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Abstract

After President Barak Obama's historical visits to Cairo, 2009 and Turkey, 2010 it was expected that new doors would open between the Muslim World and American citizens in order to eliminate cultural gaps between the two cultures. One significant door is institutions of higher education in the U.S. as public spaces for educational purposes. In these educational spaces, International Muslim Graduate Students and their American counterparts are expected to work collaboratively and cooperatively to develop a better understanding between the two cultures. This qualitative study examines the experiences of *al-rihla* of seven International Muslim Graduate Students in a Southwestern American university through in-depth interviews. The participants reflected on three aspects of their *al-rihla* experiences: Islamic concept of knowledge and *al-rihla* in search for knowledge; personal experiences; and the impact of the university's/ departments' sponsored cultural activities in bringing a better understanding of the Muslim Other. The Content Analysis method was used in analyzing the data. The analysis resulted in six themes: great appreciation of Islamic beliefs of knowledge and seeking knowledge, strong belief in *al-rihla* as a means to bring mutual understanding of the Other; priority to national culture, limited interaction and communication with American counterparts; stereotypes and concerns; and interest in participating in university administered cultural activities.

The study concludes that institutions of higher education in the U.S. are cultural spaces that can be utilized to bring better understanding of the Muslim Other.

Key words: *Al-Rihla*; International Muslim Graduate Students (IMGS); Curriculum Spaces; Public Pedagogy; Cultural Agents Of Peace

Résumé

Après les visites historiques du président Barack Obama au Caire en 2009 et la Turquie en 2010, il était prévu que de nouvelles portes seraient ouvertes entre le monde musulman et les citoyens américains en vue d'éliminer les différences culturelles entre les deux cultures. Une porte est significative établissements d'enseignement supérieur aux États-Unis comme des espaces publics à des fins éducatives. Dans ces espaces éducatifs, International Graduate Students musulmanes et leurs homologues américains sont appelés à travailler en collaboration et en coopération pour développer une meilleure compréhension entre les deux cultures. Cette étude qualitative examine les expériences d'*Al-Rihla* de sept internationaux musulmans des étudiants des cycles supérieurs dans une université du Sud-Ouest américain à travers des entrevues en profondeur. Les participants ont réfléchi sur trois aspects de leurs *al-Rihla* expériences: le concept islamique de la connaissance et *al-rihla* à la recherche de connaissances, les expériences personnelles, et l'impact de l'université et les ministères des activités parrainées par la culture en apportant une meilleure compréhension de l'Autre musulman. La méthode d'analyse du contenu a été utilisé dans l'analyse des données. L'analyse a débouché sur six thèmes: grande satisfaction des croyances islamiques de la connaissance et la connaissance cherche, forte croyance dans *al-rihla* comme un moyen d'apporter la compréhension mutuelle de l'autre, la priorité à la culture nationale, une interaction limitée et de la communication avec leurs homologues américains; les stéréotypes et préoccupations, et l'intérêt à participer à l'université administrés activités culturelles.

L'étude conclut que les institutions d'enseignement supérieur aux États-Unis sont des espaces culturels qui peuvent être utilisés pour apporter une meilleure compréhension de l'Autre musulman.

Mots clés: *Al-Rihla*; Etudiants Diplômés international Musulman (EDIM); Les espaces curriculum; La pédagogie du public; Les agents culturels de la paix

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INTRODUCTION

Culture and Cultural Identities

Culture and cultural identities, according to Huntington (1996), are civilization identities that are “shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the post-Cold War world” (p. 20). Huntington divided the world into major civilizations, amongst which are the Western and Muslim cultures, and ascribed the current global turmoil between the West and Islamic societies to cultural and religious clashes.

Civilization and culture, for Huntington (1996), both involve “values, norms, institutions, and modes of thinking” (p.41). Culture gradually builds a mental framework that defines individuals’ and groups’ ontology, shapes their behavior, and creates a framework to evaluate others’ actions (Sussman, 2000). According to Mirzoeff (1999), culture and cultural practices may expand to become a “realm where one engages with and elaborates a politics” (p. 24). Politics in this context does not refer to political practice but rather to an individual or group identity.

To establish a more cohesive group identity, Huntington (1996) argued that Muslims reclaim “identity, meaning, stability, development, power, and hope” (p. 109) by adopting the concept of “Islam is the solution” as an ideology for the twenty-first century. Islam is a spiritual, mental, and social guide for Muslims in their daily lives and practices. Being a Muslim is not merely a matter of personal faith and individual practice but rather a framework for a bounded, blended, and interconnected social life for its adherents. Islam is a guide not only to inter- and intra-personal relations but also to each and every aspect of Muslims’ lives. The Islamic law, for instance, covers seven basic areas in Muslims’ daily life and practices that include: “worship, family matters, interpersonal relations, duties and responsibilities of the political governors and the governed, criminal justice and public order, international relations, character reformation and good manners” (Shakir, 2004, p.4).

The origin of the clash between the West and Islamic civilization, in fact, is not a “civilization incompatibility,” as Hunter (1998) argued but rather, a geopolitical conflict as, “the oil and gas on which the awesome industrial and military might of the West depends is buried under the lands populated by the Muslims” (p. 13). The real causes of the Western-Islamic civilization clash are: power, determination over the use of natural resources, and economic reasons.

In a study conducted in 2007, WorldPublicOpinion.org surveyed residents in Morocco, Indonesia, Egypt, and Pakistan about U.S. policy in the Muslim world. Participants responded that the U.S.’s goal in the region was to “weaken and divide the Muslim world,” and the U.S. policy is a “political, economic, military, and cultural hegemony that threatens self-determination as well as Islamic identity” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p.88). However, between 2001 and 2007 according to Esposito & Mogahed (2007), “the largest and most comprehensive World Poll of contemporary Muslims was launched by the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies” (p. xi). The study examined the opinions of 1.3 billion Muslims on a wide variety of religious, social, and political issues — issues that have long been considered from a Western rather than a Muslim point of view. In the survey tens of thousands of face-to-face interviews were conducted in 35 nations where Muslims represent the majority or highest plurality of the population. The survey and interviews reflect the opinions of “90% of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p.xi) from around the world on contemporary global controversies about Islam. In response to a question about, “what can the West do to improve relations with the Muslim world?” both groups, the politically radicalized and the moderates, answers included, “more respect, consideration, and understanding of Islam as a religion...; being fair and less prejudiced” (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007, p.91).

International Muslim Students in the U.S. after 9/11

According to Davis (2004), the number of international students from Arab and/or Muslim countries enrolled in study programs in the U.S. declined rapidly after 9/11, decreasing by 25% for students from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, 16% for those from the United Arab Emirates, and 10% for those from Indonesia. At the graduate student level, IMGS in the U.S. represented 3.8% of all U.S. higher education students in 2004 (Davis, 2004), with a 76% decline in enrollment between 2001-02 and 2004-05 (Chow & Marcus, 2009). According to Chow and Marcus (2009), the average decline in the number of International Muslim students from predominantly Muslim countries studying in the U.S. was 15.5 percent over the period from 2001-02 to 2007-08.

It is worth noted that IMGS not only contribute to the economy of the U.S., as 46% of them are self-

supporting (Chow & Marcus, 2009), but also add to U.S. intellectual advancements and enrich and diversify the typical student body in U.S. universities. IMGS contribute significantly to U.S. academic environments by enhancing higher education policies of embracing multiculturalism, and aspirations for international and global citizenship education. Accordingly, the presence of international graduate students, in general, and IMGS, in particular, is a vital, crucial, and significant factor for promoting better relations with the international community, on a micro-level, and with the Muslim World, on a macro-level.

This qualitative study expands on the sparse existing literature by providing a new perspective for International Muslim Graduate Students' experiences of *al-rihla*.

The purpose of this study is to investigate IMGS' *al-rihal* experiences in the U.S. and the role they can play as cultural agents of peace to promote better understanding of the Muslim Other. The study attempts to answer two research questions:

What do IMGS at a southwestern U.S. university report about their experiences of *al-rihla* in search of knowledge in the U.S.?

What factors influence IMGS *al-rihla* experiences in search for knowledge in the U.S.?

BACKGROUND

My doctoral dissertation, in which I compared *al-rihla* in search for knowledge of contemporary and historical Muslim travelers, has set the stage for investigating the sparse literature about IMGS' experiences of *al-rihla* in the U.S. after 9/11. The review showed that IMGS and their *al-rihla* experiences have been explored from different perspectives; such as, communicating their Muslim identity in U.S. universities, socialization, dynamics of cross-cultural learning, public image and perception of Muslim students in the U.S. (Bavifard, 2008; Brown, 2009; Halawah, 1996; Johnson, 2004; Luna, 1993; Mohamed, 1992; Pinkerton, 2006; Schatz, 2008). The literature review revealed that international Muslim students face multi-level challenges during their study programs in the U.S. after 9/11; these range from academic challenges to socialization and communication problems with their hosting community due to misunderstanding and negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. The findings of previous research studies also indicated that international Muslim graduate and undergraduate students' experiences in the U.S. have been examined in relation to the impact of the new culture on them as sojourners in the U.S.

However, in order to validate the significance of this study and its purpose I, the researcher, argue that it is significant to examine international Muslim graduate students' experiences of *al-rihal* in the U.S. as cultural agents of peace whose *al-rihal* can be utilized as a

curriculum to promote a better understanding of the Muslim/Other,

it is all about knowing others and how that getting to know is informed by the subject position we assumed the other inhabits ... often this knowing of others is shaped by race, class, gender and sexuality discourses...also influenced by historical, social and cultural knowledge. (Cary, 2006, p.3)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two conceptual frameworks form the basis for this research study: the themes of place and space. Both themes were investigated from three different perspectives in curriculum theory: postmodern theories, cultural theories, and Islamic perspectives.

Postmodern Theory

Place for postmodernists is perceived as, "one organizing idea for political, autobiographical, racial, and gender issues in curriculum" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 2002, p.289). Place is strongly associated with individuals and/or collective historical, social, and emotional perceptions. Kincheloe and Pinar (1991) argued that a curriculum theory of place must possess a social theory and be founded on a social psychoanalytical theory of place, and "a curriculum theory must possess a particularistic social theory, a grounded view of the world in which education takes place. Without such a perspective curriculum theory operates in isolation" (Kincheloe & Pinar, 1991, p.5).

For Slattery (2006), place is a curriculum for ecological sustainability, environmental protection, cultural, political, and educational action. Slattery argued that "educators must orchestrate environments where the interconnectedness of subject matter, human personas, and the natural environment is constantly and consciously foregrounded" (p. 205).

Postmodernist Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997) discussed "space of difference" as a transitional space for change, and argued that "space of difference" is: 1) a social space shaped by "historical conjunctures of power and of social and cultural differences", 2) an unconscious space, and 3) a "powerful pedagogical resource for teachers" (p. 38). For Janet Miller (1990) "Space" meant the creation of a space for collaborative voices of teachers to "build new positionalities for themselves among the controlling and authoritative systems and structures of their lives" (p. 141). Postmodernist Lisa Cary (2006) focused on "space" as an epistemological approach for researchers, and argued that studying "curriculum as a discursively produced historically, socially, politically and economically inscribed epistemological space ... is an epistemological approach to study the knowing subject and researcher positionality" (p. xi).

Cultural Studies

For Homi Bhabha the homeland is a place; a physical and imaginary location "that will ground and guarantee your identity" (as cited in Huddart, 2006, p.70). Bhabha (1994)

discussed cultural differences as physical and imaginary boundaries and the “place from which something begins its presencing” (p. 7). Cultures for Bhabha meet in a “third-space,” an imaginary, “unrepresentable liminal space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha, 1994, p.56). It is in this “third space” the “in-between” zone that cultures meet to “negotiate rather than negate” (p. 37) their differences.

Islamic Studies

The themes of place and space in Islam are better understood through four different forms of travel and movement; physically and spiritually. These four forms are: *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), *hijra* (migration), *ziyarat* (visits to the shrines), and *al-rihla* (travel in the search of knowledge be it religious and/or secular). Travel in these four forms is meant to encourage Muslims to move in Islamic and/or non-Islamic lands for religious as well as secular knowledge. Some of these journeys may combine two or more forms of travel, such as in the case of Medieval Muslim travelers who combined *hajj* and *rihla* in their journeys (Eickelman & Pescatori, 1990). The primary purpose of travel in Islam is to satisfy religious obligations, to meet and communicate with people from other cultures, to contemplate God’s creation, and to learn, expand, and exchange knowledge with other people, —O Mankind! We have created you from a single pair, a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes in order that you come to know one another [not that you may despise one another] (Qur’an 49:13)

METHODOLOGY

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then erased. The data were analyzed using the Content Analysis method refined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Content analysis is a “systematic process” that, “consists of a division of the text into units of meaning and a quantification of these units according to certain rules” (as cited in Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p.337). Data were broken into the smallest meaningful units. A unit may be defined as a, “few words, a sentence, many sentences, or a paragraph that has one idea in a —portion of content” (Erlanson et al., 1993, p.117). Accordingly, the data were unitized, categorized, and patterns were identified. The data analysis for the study was completed over several cycles; in each cycle the generated categories were read and examined and a new set of categories was developed. The study resulted in six themes.

Experiences of Al-rihla

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with seven IMGS from a southwestern university in the U.S. The participants were from different countries, academic fields, genders, and graduate programs. The participants were asked a set of semi-structured questions that are divided into three categories: perceptions of the Islamic concept of knowledge and *al-rihla* in search of knowledge, reflections on personal experiences of *al-rihla* in the U.S., and interest and participation in the university/departmental sponsored cultural activities in order to promote better understanding of the Muslim Other.

In reflection to the first category, the participants noted

that Islam encourages Muslims to seek knowledge and to travel to distant lands in search of it. The participants commented and cited references from the Qur’an and/or *hadith* in this respect; such as, “knowledge [in Islam] is related to the first word in the Qur’an: Read (Recite) [the Quran], “Seek knowledge from cradle to grave” (*hadith*). One student asserted that “Muslims are encouraged to seek knowledge where it is in the world and to bear the burden of traveling for it in what part it is”. Interestingly, one of the participants argued that *al-rihla* should take place outside of the Islamic world rather than inside it, as *al-rihla* is an opportunity to learn about other people and re-examine one’s own ideas and thoughts, and thus, “you may change your ideas ... and get a better understanding of other people ... it gives you a way of thinking about a society not within the Islamic world”.

In their reflection to the second category of questions about their experiences of being Muslims in the U.S. after 9/11, one female participant with a hair cover commented on her first year experience,

I was telling myself not to be afraid, be what you are, and then befriend them ... in my first year I was kind of hiding because of the *hijab* I am wearing, I was thinking the Americans will think I am a kind of “terrorist”... yesterday I was not afraid anymore and I walked by myself and said ... this is America ... I said just let me go ... and let people see me ... let them see who I am ... this is my identity ... I am a Muslim.

Another female IMGS reflected on her experience:

The difficulty [in communicating with Americans] comes from their little knowledge about our culture ... when they see me they don’t see me [as a person] but see my clothes, they see my *hijab* and think that person maybe a “terrorist” ... that was very difficult for me in the beginning but once they knew me things changed ... they changed and now respect me more.

Misunderstanding of or misconduct toward Muslim women is, most of the time, due to a lack of knowledge about basic cultural practices in Islam and, more specifically, Muslim women. One of the female IMGS shared her experience of the cultural/religious differences in man-woman relationships between American society and her society,

When I came here, I was the first covered Muslim female in my department, they gave me their hands to shake, I am from a country has a different relationship between men and women, we kind of have distance that we keep between us... not not to talk to them. I met with an American friend, she introduced me to her friend from Latin America, he wanted to shake hand with me but I did not accept it ... my American friend was shocked ... then told me she was surprised why not shaking hands with her male friend ... I don’t shake hands with neither Muslim nor European men.

In regard to cultural interaction with their American counterparts and how did IMGS represent their culture(s), they reflected their interest in presenting their national cultures to their American counterparts through the university cultural events,

Since I arrived here.... there was the International Week, I never

missed any of these weeks, I have been active and represented my country with other students.

And,

Last year I joined the cultural festival in the I-Week... I danced with my group to introduce my country, in this year we also had International buffet so we introduced our food/cuisine.

Some students found it easier to first communicate with one colleague, who would then introduce them to other American colleagues as this participant reflected,

I had this American friend ... she visited my region twice so she already knows the real person in me, so she was good to me from the beginning ... but other people did not trust me from the beginning but after they knew me they became much better ... I see the change in their ways of treating me.

Another participant referred to the negative impact of the media in the U.S., and how it portrays Muslims, in general, as “bad” people,

The majority of them [Americans], they know very little about my culture, they don't treat me in person but according to what they see in the media which shows a lot of false things that shape their misunderstanding about us [Muslims], they don't know real people [Muslims] but what the media shows them.

In their answers to questions from the third category, the participants reflected on the importance of the university's and/or departmental sponsored cultural activities. However, though most of the participants expressed interest in those activities they emphasized the need for more in-depth approaches that bring effective and constructive dialogue that open discussions between IMGs and their American counterparts. One participant commented,

I want Americans not to be afraid of asking any questions about my culture, and ...whether they are thinking, about my culture, right or wrong. I think it is more about *how we think* rather than our food or cloths.

Another participant questioned the impact of those cultural events especially on the long term communication and interaction,

I don't know how helpful are these events to build good relationships, if I know that they will really help I will be very happy to be involved not only to introduce my culture but also to learn about theirs [American culture]

And further added that presentations about critical topics are also important to give a better idea about the Muslim Other, “I know about two events on campus: one of them about a social topic, while the other was a presentation about “terrorism”

One of the participants reflected his/her enthusiasm in departmental sponsored cultural activities and how helpful they are in promoting better understanding to other cultures,

in my department ... we have a cultural event ... all international students give presentations about their culture once or twice a month ... with some fliers and students and food from their

country ...maybe 15-20 minutes presentation and chit-chat ...it will have really good impact.

Another participant commented on his/her American counterparts' reaction after one of these cultural events,

They [American students] were astonished to learn that they knew almost nothing [about my culture], and they were willing to learn more, they wanted to hear answers to many questions in their heads. Some of them asked me for more presentations about other aspects of my culture.

However, the participants emphasized the need to more in-depth activities that help answer the “lots of questions about Islam and Muslims” and have an intellectual impact rather than that of food and dancing only. The participants emphasized “open-mindedness” as an approach for both the IMGs and their American counterparts in order to bring a better understanding of the Other. One of the participants added,

I think being open minded and less judgemental or critical is very helpful to start understanding the culture without misconceptions and without having any other concepts but just to stop and start to understand [directly from the Other].

FINDINGS AND EMERGING THEMES

Six common themes were identified in the data analysis with some individual differences in size and scope: great appreciation of knowledge, seeking knowledge, and *al-rihla* in seeking for knowledge; a strong belief in *al-rihla* as a means to mutual understanding of the Other; stereotypes and concerns; priority to one's national culture; limited interaction with American students; and interest in university and/or departmental sponsored cultural activities.

1. Great Appreciation of Knowledge, Seeking Knowledge, and *Al-Rihla* in Seeking Knowledge

All of the participants reflected great appreciation to knowledge, seeking knowledge, and *al-rihla* in seeking knowledge. They discussed the terms “knowledge” and “seeking knowledge” in regard to their broader meanings as goals to attain and means to benefit human kind, to communicate with other people, and to learn about other ways of thinking. Some students noted the difficulties that seekers of knowledge might face in their *al-rihla* but also noted that embarking on *al-rihla* is a challenge and a choice in itself.

2. A Strong Belief in *Al-Rihla* as a Means to Mutual Understanding of the Other

All participants stated that *al-rihla* should be approached and experienced as a means to a mutual understanding of the Other. Students had varied experiences in learning about American culture and teaching Americans about their own cultures. The number of opportunities for IMGs to learn about American culture was definitely greater than that for their American counterparts to learn about

different IMGS' cultures. However, the IMGS referred to their host communities as being "very limited" in terms of their efforts to learn about IMGS and their culture(s).

3. Stereotypes and Concerns

IMGS reported that stereotypes about Islam and Muslims have been a concern for them. This was especially true for female IMGS who wear a hair scarf *hijab*. Some participants in this research study, males/females, stated concerns about reporting their experiences. The researcher met with some participants individually prior to their interviews to answer all of their questions confirming that the study is anonymous and the interview records will be erased immediately after being transcribed. And so she did.

4. Priority to National Culture

One of the most important aspects of Muslim societies that most Westerners and Americans are not aware of is that Islam, for Muslims, is a unifying religion rather than a culture. Muslims practice different cultures. Each Muslim country has its own unique culture and cultural practices which may or may not relate to a collective Islamic culture.

5. Limited Interaction with Americans

The IMGS reflected extensively on their little interaction with their American peers and community and described it as "very limited" in terms of the efforts that their American peers put in order to learn about IMGS and their culture(s). Most of the participants discussed the negative impact of the media in the U.S. in portraying Muslims, all Muslims in general, especially after 9/11 as "bad" people and; thus, creating the barrier (s) that hinders a positive cross-culture communication.

6. Interest in University Sponsored Cultural Activities

Most of the IMGS reacted positively to the university and/or departmentally sponsored and administrative programs. Such programs provide a safe environment for IMGS which, in return, encourages their participation and infuse the informal learning setting with a sense of comfort and security. Likewise, American students often feel more comfortable in reaching out to IMGS under the umbrella of the university or academic departments. The participants commented on their participation in I-Week, the different cultural activities, and how beneficial these cultural programs were in bringing IMGS closer to their American peers.

DISCUSSION

In his article *Islam and the United States: Streams of Convergence, Strands of Divergence*, 2004, Ali Mazrui analyzed the relations between Islam and the Western World and the United States. Mazrui identified four

historical phases that have governed this relation. The first phase is traced back to the first half of the 20th century and was characterized by a close relation between Euro-American values and traditional Islamic values in areas such as "sexual behavior, gender roles, alcohol consumption and the death penalty," and distant relations in areas such as "prejudice and racism" (p. 793). As America became more liberal "ethically and sexually" (p. 794) in the second half of the 20th century, Mazrui argued that the relations entered a new phase; the second phase. The second phase witnessed more divergence rather than convergence due to the deterioration of the importance of religion in the U.S. and the West. Within the 21st century the relations diverged even more in social and religion areas as the USA became more libertarian and "flirting with the idea of same-sex marriages-or at least same sex civil unions, truly un-Islamic" belief (p. 794). However, after September 11, deeper divergence has occurred where Muslims in the West and the US have become "targets of harassments in various ways," while Westerners in the Muslim world became more "concerned about hatred and consequent physical harm" (p. 794). On the other hand, this fourth historical phase has been witnessing more convergence due to Muslims' aspirations to liberalism and democratic regimes inspired by the American and Western democratic systems, and the belief in, "the necessity to reinterpret Islam to bring about the improvement of the human rights of the Islamic *Ummah*" (p.794).

However, the Trade Center bombing attack on September 11 has distorted the Muslim image and presence, especially that of international Muslims, in the U.S. The consequences were enormous and made Muslims in the U.S., "vulnerable targets for racism and political discrimination" (as cited in Fawaz Gerges, 2003, p.79). One of the consequences was the re-emergence of Islamophobia as a term and practice that influenced the American-Muslim, especially international Muslims, daily life interaction. Islamophobia, and for the purpose of this paper, is used, "to refer to an irrational distrust, fear or rejection of the Muslim religion and those who are (perceived as) Muslims" (as cited in Gardner, Karakasoglus, & Luchtenberg, 2008, p.120). Some scholars further argue that Islamophobia is a reflection of "discrimination and racism on a private, societal, political and institutional level" (Gardner et al, 2008, p.120). As a result, Muslims have been "de-differentiated." Gardner et al. (2008) define the term "de-differentiation" as a "way to identify Islam and Muslims without differentiating between countries and groups, or between Islamic terror and peaceful Muslim neighbors," (p. 120) or individuals. The IMGS as a minority group of intellectual Muslims, as this study showed, were/are no exception.

Therefore, it is crucial that institutes of higher education in the U.S. redefine their presence as public spaces for public pedagogical purposes about Islam as

a culture and IMGS as cultural agents of peace. Public spaces, according to Greene (1982) are defined “by principles that enable diverse human beings to act in common and to be recognized for what they do” (p. 6). Cultural spaces, thus, become educational spaces where teaching takes place through social practices and in social settings (Giroux, 2004). It is through those spaces that cross-culture communication can be re-constructed if pedagogy is understood as a “performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences [students in this case], texts, and institutional formations” (Giroux, 2004, p.61). Accordingly, institutes of higher education in the U.S. become effective public pedagogy spaces that will enhance the production as well as circulation of new meanings to be spread to the larger culture. Culture, then, becomes, “a circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, and discarded ... and discourses are created” (Giroux, 2004, p.60). Education then will expand beyond traditional curriculum and practice to not only,

“makes visible the role that schools [higher education institutes] play as sites of political and cultural contestation, but also because it is within this debate that the notion of the United States as an open and democratic society is being both questioned and redefined” (Giroux, 1991, p.502).

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that IMGS in a Southwestern American university are a marginalized group of intellectual Muslims who have the potential, good intention, and good will to bridge cultural gaps with their American counterparts and hosting community. This research study is not only a pioneering study of IMGS experiences of al-rihla but also of the role that IMGS can play as proactive cultural agents of peace between the Muslim World and American citizens.

The IMGS’ cultural experiences reflected in this study shed light on the size and scope of the cultural gap between IMGS and their American counterparts at a specific Southwestern American university. Though some of these IMGS experiences reflected caution and, at sometimes, fear of being an international Muslim, the narratives reflect the IMGS good intentions and will in initiating a new phase in IMGS-American counterparts cross-culture communication. It is in this Third Space” that cultural translation occurs and negotiation takes place, and, thus, allowing better opportunities to better understand the Other. Cultural spaces are “unconscious space” shaped by “historical conjunctures of power,” can be utilized constructively to transform educators to become “producers of culture rather than re-producers” of it (Ellsworth, 1997, p.39).

Cultural events such as music, dancing, traditional cuisine, and dressing in traditional clothes are no longer

viewed as effective tools for intellectual graduate students, Muslims and Americans, to bridge serious and critical cultural, political, and educational gaps. IMGS and their American counterparts are searching for more effective ways of cross-culture communication that promotes a better understanding of the Other.

This study challenges as well as inspires educators, Muslims and non-Muslims, to explore the IMGS-American counterparts’ cross-culture interaction and communication from different angles. This research can by no means be generalized; however, it opens the doors widely to constructively explore the IMGS experiences of al-rihla for peaceful purposes that will ultimately, and hopefully, help bring a better understanding of the Muslim Other.

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