

MELA Social Justice Lecture Series: Season 1

In the fall of 2020, the Social Justice Committee launched the Social Justice lecture series, hosting academic experts to share their current research on social justice-related topics in the Middle East and its diasporas. The lecture series aims to increase awareness of social justice principles in our professional practice and to also bring attention to how libraries and archives are supporting or failing to support, this crucial research. Recordings will be made available on YouTube, at the speakers' discretion.

[Click here to view the Social Justice Lecture Series on YouTube](#)

The inaugural season, entitled "Stories And Silences: Research On Race In The Middle East," is running throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, and is inviting researchers working on race and racism in the Middle East, broadly defined, and/or its diasporas.

Season 1 (Fall 2020-Spring 2021)



1 – [Zavier Wingham, NYU](#)

Notes from the Field: On Researching Blackness, Slavery, and the African Diaspora in the Ottoman Empire
September 24, 2020

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire experienced a revival in the black slave trade. As a result of the Egyptian occupation of Sudan in 1820 and the Ottoman occupation in 1835, enslaved Africans entered Ottoman markets, thus forming a stronger link between the imperial center and its frontiers. Often, Ottomans disregarded ethnic and geographic distinctions between Africans and instead projected their own ideas of difference, labeling them zenci (black) and/or Arap (Arab). In this same period, the empire sought to modernize its functions in relation to western Europe, and many Ottoman elites seized upon hierarchical civilizational discourse, and in doing so, metaphors of slavery and race. This talk explores the historical background of blackness, slavery, and the African diaspora in the Ottoman empire, as well as (un)disciplinary methods and archival aspects of research.



2 – [Dr. Lanisa Kitchiner, African and Middle Eastern Division, Library of Congress](#) – Keynote Speaker of 2020 MELA Annual Meeting

Confronting Critical Conversations in American Cultural Institutions

October 21, 2020

[Watch Recording on Youtube](#)

In her keynote address to the 2020 Middle East Librarians Association Annual Meeting, Dr. Kitchiner will address what she considers the central most significant responsibilities of cultural

institutions today: to ensure inclusivity and to engender radical curiosity. She will argue that if we put the full force of our collective power behind the complete realization of these responsibilities, we will have prepared the very best weapons against the “isms” (racism, sexism, classism, colorism, primitivism, nationalism, etc.) that plague our world.



3 – [Dr. Rachel Schine, UC Boulder](#)

Imagining Africa in Arabic Popular Literature

November 19, 2020

[Watch Recording on YouTube](#)

Many Arabic epics (*siyar sha‘biyya*) incorporate an interaction across the Middle East’s frontier with East Africa, though each construct this space and its inhabitants differently. I offer a comparison of Africa as imagined in *Sīrat ‘Antar*, the most well-known Arabic epic in the region today, and *Sīrat al-Amīrah Dhāt al-Himma*, Arabic’s longest epic. Both works incorporate a black-skinned protagonist who, regardless of their descent, is perceived by Arab-Muslim society as hailing from the Sub-Saharan “lands of the blacks,” or *Bilād al-Sūdān*, a common exonym for the region, and their expeditions to the region are also fraught homecomings. Using these Black-Arab heroes’ stories and the diffuse textual traditions through which they were transmitted, this talk explores Arabic literature’s sense of racial limits and possibilities in view of the histories of diplomacy, migration, and slaving that linked Sub-Saharan Africa with central lands of the medieval Arab-Muslim world.



4 – [Dr. Chouki El Hamel, University of Arizona](#)

Slavery, Race and the Archives in Morocco: The Epistemology of Silence

December 17, 2020

This paper explains how the archives in Morocco are managed by officials and used by readers and how they created a wall of silence regarding controversial issues such as slavery, racism, and gender. The silencing of female voices and other marginalized groups has affected the availability of documents in the official historical archives, and this silence created epistemological obstacles. For instance, documents related to the Protectorate at the Direction des Archives Royales were not released to the public domain until 2009 and the Moroccan National Archives (*Archives du Maroc*) was not established until 2013. The archival silence created an intentional gap in the production of history. I raise political and epistemological questions to challenge the archival power in the production and transmission of knowledge on slavery and racism. My previous book *Black Morocco* was an attempt to place slavery and black Moroccans (Haratin and black people of West African origins) in the national narrative. It highlighted the Moroccan heritage in the collective cultural memories. My current project focuses on the agency and resistance of black Moroccans and the continual insistence on their freedom. I focus on using the archives for historical reparative justice. I intend to bring to

light the forces that created maroonage and maintained social and legal identities in Morocco. I will thus examine the historical roots of this marginalized group that led to the present dilemma of racial identity and discrimination in Morocco.



**5 – [Dr. Beeta Baghoolizadeh, Bucknell University](#)
“We had no slaves in Iran”: Uncovering Evidence of an Erased History
January 21, 2021**

In this talk, Dr. Baghoolizadeh will speak on the process of abolition as one of erasure in Iran. Although wealthy and elite Iranians had enslaved peoples from the Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia, and East Africa for centuries until the Manumission Law of 1929, references to any history of enslavement are often denied or downplayed both in academic and nonacademic settings. Drawing on linguistic, spatial, and visual sources, Dr. Baghoolizadeh will speak on these erasures in archival contexts to discuss their lingering influence in shaping discussions on enslavement and race in Iran.



**6 – [Tiffany Bradley, Colored Criticism](#)
Revisioning Research: Looking At Identity And Visual Culture
February 18, 2021**

Critic Tiffany Bradley will examine art, literature, and photography as tools to explore Middle Eastern communities. She will discuss cultivating a multicultural, multiracial approach to research in the Middle East and North Africa. Her discussion will be informed by critical race theory and her anthropological fieldwork in Nubian communities in Cairo and Palestinians of African descent in Jerusalem. She will also talk about online networks looking at shared histories from a fresh perspective. This interactive session will consider approaches to diversifying studies for academics, researchers, and students.



**7 – [Matthew S. Hopper, Cal Poly](#)
Slaves Of One Master: Globalization And Slavery In Arabia In The Age Of Empire
March 18, 2021**

Enslaved Africans and their descendants contributed in vital ways to the economy and culture of eastern Arabia. Global economic forces, especially international demand for Gulf pearls and dates, drove demand in the Gulf for slave labor from Africa. The reversal of those trends in the 1930s spelled economic collapse for the Gulf and an eventual end to the slave trade. This presentation traces the origins of the African diaspora in eastern Arabia, explores the lives and labors of enslaved Africans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and discusses the significance of the African legacy in the Gulf today.



**8 – [Azadeh Vatanpour, Emory University](#)
Challenges of Diversity: Nationalism and Minorities In Iran
April 27, 2021**

This presentation will explore the constructed racism of Aryanism in the Iranian context, arguing that this concept has given the Persian-speaking Shi'i ethno-religious group an advantage over other minority groups and communities. Furthermore, it will look at the origin of this constructed racism that dates back to the pre-Islamic

Sassanid era and was reinforced at various historical times contingent on socio-political situations. By exploring the history of discrimination against ethno-religious minority groups in Iran, this talk will show the continual suppression and forced assimilation of these groups by the Iranian Shi'i state through the construction of the discourse of "otherness."

**9- [Aisha Wahab](#), [Kristen St. John](#), and [Richenda Brim](#)
Re-centering the Bench
June 15, 2021**

Since 2018, Stanford Libraries' Conservation Services has been involved in the Linked Conservation Data Consortium with institutions in the U.S. and the U.K. seeking to increase the visibility and accessibility of conservation documentation through the use of Linked Open Data. The project spurred an evaluation of our documentation practices, forms, and terminology. During the process of examining how we define the terms we use in our documentation, we began to discuss specific terminology and to address terms that are defined in exclusionary, Euro-centric, and/or colonialist language, such as the term "non-Western". We believe conservation departments should follow suit and be a part of the discussion about whether our documentation practices are inclusive and respectful. In this talk we will address questions including, Can we reject such white-centric, Euro-centric, orientalist, colonialist practices of description? What changes are needed in our current practice? Are conservation labs already asking these questions and implementing change in their institutions and if so what changes have been made to develop anti-racist terminology and practices? Evaluating our documentation language and creating more inclusive practices are tangible steps towards positive change. Our documentation is a legacy for future generations of conservators. We should ask ourselves, what kind of legacy do we want to leave behind?



**10 – [Professor Baki Tezcan, UC Davis](#)
Turkish Literary Sources on Whiteness and Blackness at the
Early Modern Ottoman Court
July 15, 2021**

[Watch recording on YouTube](#)

In the light of three books that were either written with a view to secure the patronage of the Chief Black Eunuch of the Ottoman court, or to critique him, between the early

seventeenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, Tezcan will discuss Ottoman literary representations of Africans, how these representations intersect with the heavily gendered environment of the court, and how racial difference is produced in these intersections.