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**Report: Teaching about the South  
in “Islamophobia and Antisemitism in American History”**

Soon after the NEH Summer Seminar “Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South” I began teaching a summer undergraduate course titled “Islamophobia and Antisemitism in American History” at New York University. I participated in the seminar in part to determine how exactly to integrate the study of a distinctive region – the American South – in the history of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, beyond stereotypes and other presumptions. Rather than having one specific lesson on “the South,” I decided to integrate it in to the course as a whole as to not advance the notion of the South as inherently separate from the rest of the United States when it comes to these forms of prejudice.

While it was a course on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, major recurring themes in the course included race, immigration, and foreign policy. To introduce the students to the centrality of race and immigration, on the first day of class, I gave students a court briefing of a federal court case that took place in Charleston, South Carolina in 1914. The court case, *Re Dow*, involved a Syrian immigrant living in South Carolina named George Dow who had to prove that he was white in order to be naturalized as an American citizen. Dow’s lawyer made the claim that, in contrast to the ruling of a prior judge, Dow was not “Asiatic” but rather Semitic, and that since Jews, as fellows Semites received citizenship, so too should Syrians like Dow since the Jewish example indicated that Semites were white. In comparison, I also gave them another American court case from the same era in which another Syrian Christian used his Christianity (and Jesus’s Middle Eastern origins) to make the case for his naturalization.

I used these Syrian Naturalization cases to emphasize the intersection of concepts of race and in the history of anti-Semitism and anti-Arab sentiments in U.S. history. The cases also served to show the way in which Judaism was sometimes included in American identity in ways that Islam was not. Further discussing race and religion, I also taught students about the first Muslims in America – African Muslims enslaved in the South, which showed the ways in which racial identity was so often the most central way of categorizing people in the United States, defining them even more so than religious difference.

In another lesson, I discussed economic stereotypes of Jews, Arab, and Muslims, making use of some of the new material that I learned at the NEH Seminar. In the American South, both European Jews and Syrian Arabs often worked as peddlers soon after immigration, walking from farm to farm in rural areas selling their wares, which required little formal English training. Ultimately many of these peddlers become owners of general stores and clothing stores throughout the region, a profession that became ubiquitous for both groups. Unfortunately, their participation in these professions as “economic middlemen” often stimulated negative stereotypes about Jews and Arabs which were strikingly similar, showing a point of intersection of the two prejudices focused on in the course.

I also had my students watch two films that specifically focused on two major anti-Semitic events in the South that took places over a century apart. After reading texts by Eric Goldstein that discussed the broader context of many American Christians associating Jews with the economic changes of industrialization, we watched and discussed “The People vs. Leo Frank” a film about the 1915 lynching of American Jew Leo Frank. Finally, on the last day of the course, we watched the Vox documentary “Charlottesville: Race and Terror” about the 2017

“Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, which featured portrayals of anti-Semitic rhetoric today at an event purported to be organized in defense of a Robert E. Lee statue.

At the end of the course, I was pleased that one of my students chose to write his final research paper related to the history of the region. Titling it “Leo Frank to Charlottesville: A Timeline of Judeophobia in the American South,” the student’s paper brought together many of the themes we covered in one integrated work, and assured me that, despite focusing on the South across many weeks rather than just in one, students came away with an thorough and overarching understanding of the history of anti-Semitism in one of the country’s most intriguing and iconic regions.