



Profile: Brian Edwards
A Scholar Assesses How Culture Goes Global

What is the relationship between American culture and the United States as a political entity? According to Dr. Brian T. Edwards, associate professor of English, Comparative Literary Studies and American Studies at Northwestern University, “One moves fluidly through the world, consumed with relish by those who otherwise reject the politics of its source. The other trods heavily, yet wonders how it might harness the soft power of culture to win hearts and minds in a part of the world resistant to its policies.”

Given the fresh and even surprising ways that popular culture now circulates globally, cultural critics and State Department policymakers alike are hard-pressed to interpret what their own takeaway about the intertwining of culture and foreign relations should be. To address this idea deficit, Dr. Edwards sought to study how a new world of cultural globalization operates in the Middle East. “The Internet allows local and international communities to form and interact,” he observes. “Cybercafes have become complex social sites where gender, class and status are renegotiated. And on campuses in the Middle East, Islamic studies compete with English language and American studies as means by which to comprehend and enter the world.” As a result of such new cultural migrations, very little is known about the “Arab street” or how American culture is consumed and received by young populations in intellectual hotspots like Cairo, Fez and Tehran. “It is time,” he concludes, “for a full-scale reassessment of how we imagine the role of culture and understand its global operation.” It is this reassessment of cultural migration, and its impact on thoughtfully selected Middle Eastern locales, that Dr. Edwards set out to pursue and fulfill as the focus of his Carnegie Corporation studies.

Dr. Henry S. Bienen, president of Northwestern University, spoke of Dr. Edwards' qualifications for exploring such complex issues when he wrote a letter nominating him to be a Carnegie Scholar. "Brian works at the intersection of international relations and cultural study," Dr. Bienen wrote. "He brings to bear a background in American Studies and the Arab world with excellent language skills. He is interested in public diplomacy. He can inform us on critical issues of cultural clash and foreign policy."

Dr. Edwards was selected as a Carnegie Scholar in 2005 to conduct research for his forthcoming book, *After the American Century: American Culture in Middle Eastern Circulation*. The book recognizes that the populations of North Africa and the Middle East are overwhelmingly young, and that circuits of communication and social interaction have altered dramatically in this digital age. Accordingly, Dr. Edwards' book takes the reader onto campuses and into cybercafes, chatrooms, cinemas, literary salons, and neighborhoods of the region. It deepens public and scholarly discussions about the role of American culture in the world by providing evidence based on research and firsthand observation; makes policy recommendations about the efficacy and design of cultural programs; and attempts to further open up channels of cross-cultural communication. "Brian is a great example of a new generation of scholars in the humanities and non-quantitative social sciences who simply refuse to be boxed in by the boundaries that their putative disciplines create," says Dr. Andrew Wachtel, dean of Northwestern University's graduate school and former director of its Roberta Buffett Center for International and Comparative Studies.

While *After the American Century* is indisputably the centerpiece of Dr. Edwards' Carnegie Corporation-supported studies, "so many other things have resulted from my research," he says, including teaching at Northwestern and other campuses; speaking to both academic and general audiences; and writing for scholarly as well as popular publications. "From Noah Feldman and other Carnegie Scholars," he continues, "I've learned how important it is to share the lessons learned along the way with different audiences."

Dr. Edwards' cutting-edge work is prized for its originality and distinctive approach, says Patricia Rosenfield, director of Carnegie Corporation's Scholars Program. "Brian Edwards is one of the few scholars who is carefully examining the field of American studies in foreign universities," Rosenfield explains, "as well as studying the relationship of scholarship and real-world opinions through in-depth research in the countries, their institutions and with their young-adult populations. His transnational focus reveals the complexity of intercultural communication, especially between the United States and different Muslim societies."

Members of Carnegie Corporation's selection committee who reviewed Dr. Edwards' research proposal expressed confidence in his ability to meet the challenges inherent in his project. One reviewer called Dr. Edwards' research plan "a wonderfully audacious proposal by a scholar who seems perfectly suited to pull it off with great success. His writing style is particularly lively and engaging, and his observations about current federal approaches to propaganda seem right on target." A second reviewer was also optimistic, describing the proposal as "imaginative and ambitious" and predicting that nuanced findings would be the welcome result. And a third called Dr. Edwards "an impressive young scholar with ambitious plans" and looked forward to "a fascinating discussion of ideas about the U.S. and how they are circulated in the media and through the cyber culture and education."

Dr. Edwards' imaginative work is well known to Dr. Wai Chee Dimock, who collaborated with him on the Globalizing American Studies project that has brought a new generation of American-studies scholars to the Northwestern campus. Dr. Dimock, herself a specialist in transnational trends, is the William Lampson Professor of English and American Studies at Yale University. "No other Americanist has the fluency in Arabic that Professor Edwards does," Dr. Dimock observes. "The fluency is reflected not only in his ease in the language but also in his immersion in a mental universe radically different from that of the English-speaking world."

A fascination with different worlds began early for Brian Edwards. Not that his family of origin was given to cruising the Nile or crossing the Sahara on camelback. Dr. Edwards describes, instead, a traditional American upbringing. His birthplace was Brooklyn, New York. The family eventually settled in Greenwich, Connecticut, where Brian went to public schools.

It was through his family that he got an early start on enjoying popular culture. His parents had chosen a photo of each of their three sons to feature prominently on a photo wall in the family home. Brian's eight-by-ten photo, taken when he was about nine, captures him posed as Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars* in a white judo outfit. Though he remembers feeling mildly dissatisfied with the homemade outfit at the time, "I see now that it correctly brought together an Arab look, a martial art, and a World War II rifle in ways that [filmmaker George] Lucas had himself joined east Asia, North Africa, and the 1940s with the Zen qualities of *The Force*, an epic Sahara, and Darth Vader and the storm troopers," Dr. Edwards wrote decades later in "Kiddie Orientalism," an essay about *Star Wars* in a post-9/11 world that was published in the avant-garde cultural journal *The Believer*.

When he was 15, his family took a tour of Europe. From Spain, they ferried to

Tangier. Young Brian was mesmerized by the exotica of Morocco. “I was entranced with the different kinds of clothes, the medina, everything,” Dr. Edwards recalls. His younger brother bought a silver dagger there and Brian later bartered with him to make it his own. Laying claim to that dagger was an early harbinger of things to come. Morocco was to become both a wellspring of inspiration for his scholarly work and “a part of the world I cherish.”

Another source of inspiration was Yale University, which he attended both as an undergraduate and graduate student, beginning in 1986. The decision to go to Yale was easy for a young man drawn both to literature and drama. “In the late 1980s, Yale was an epicenter of literary studies and had a renowned theater school,” Dr. Edwards recalls. “It had a prominent faculty and a distinctive way of approaching literature.” He was encouraged by his professors to think about how literature reflects the larger society. “My interest in literature made me want to study American culture.” He earned a B.A. in English, *magna cum laude*, with distinction in English, as well as the Lloyd Mifflin Award for a Senior Essay in English, in 1990. Two years later he was back at Yale to begin graduate work in American studies.

As a Yale undergraduate he had written some plays and, during the two years between college and graduate school he co-founded the Year Zero Theater Group in Brooklyn, New York, for which he was both a playwright and a producer. To pay the bills he worked as an editor in book publishing. He also contributed interviews he had conducted with literary luminaries to a nonfiction book, *In the Vernacular*, published in 1991.

Among those luminaries was Eudora Welty, who spent time with him in her book-filled home in Jackson, Mississippi, and folk artists and musicians whom he tracked down at their homes, sometimes many miles off the paved roads of the state. Like the earlier family trip to Morocco, Dr. Edwards still remembers the southern road trip as helping him become the cultural scholar he is today. “Eudora Welty and Mississippi’s folk artists gave me a rich context for thinking about all kinds of art in conversation with each other,” Dr. Edwards recalls appreciatively.

He was a 24-year-old graduate student when he returned to that earlier source of inspiration, Morocco. “During graduate school I spent time in Morocco—first a few weeks, then a summer, then a year,” Dr. Edwards recalls. “Not a usual course for an American studies graduate student, as my dissertation director commented on more than one occasion, but he encouraged me. At first I was interested in how Morocco was viewed through the familiarizing frames of literary, artistic and cinematic portraits by outsiders—in some ways I was trying to deconstruct my own fascination with Tangier as a 15-year old and come to

terms with the misrepresentation of Arab culture and history by U.S. media and pop culture during the 1990-91 Gulf War. But as I became familiar with Morocco, studied Arabic and had conversations with Moroccan academics and graduate students, I became increasingly interested in the complicated and sometimes unpredictable ways in which Moroccans responded to, or re-coded, American portraits of their country and culture.” He gives as an example the film *Casablanca*, which, he observes, has little to do with the city itself. “I was surprised at the pride many Moroccans took in the film, as well as the interesting ways in which they played with outsiders’ fascination about it.”

He began extensively researching the theme of cultural migration to and from Morocco as his dissertation topic. Using his language skills in Arabic, both standard and colloquial, and French, he conversed with hundreds of students and faculty and presented his findings in a number of seminars, lectures and colloquia in North Africa. He says he particularly benefitted from discourse with a dynamic group of Moroccan scholars who ran an active center for cultural studies at Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah University in Fez.

In Fez, the prevailing stereotype to be found in both American literature and contemporary travel writing was that in entering the Fez medina “you step back into the Middle Ages,” Dr. Edwards comments. But during his time as a scholar there, he observed the visible signs of modern and foreign culture as well. “I kept seeing the intrusion of the latest New York Yankee cap, the McDonald’s restaurant, the Western-style supermarket, even donuts, and wondered why that didn’t make it into the travel section of the newspaper or Hollywood films.”

He was named a Fulbright Fellow to Morocco in 1995 and received additional research grants from the American Institute of Maghrib Studies (AIMS). Maghrib (sometimes spelled “Maghreb”) is the Arabic name for both Morocco and northwest Africa, although there is more to say on the subject. “In English, Morocco orients itself around the French word (*Maroc*)”—itself derived from the city of Marrakech—“and more importantly around the idea that Morocco is as much the land of French colonialism as it is the land of Moroccans,” Dr. Edwards has written. “The name for the country in Arabic, *al-Maghrib*, means the farthest west, the land of the setting sun.” He explains that the importance of the distinction is that “the Arabic name of Morocco, *al-Maghrib*, orients itself around a different center: namely, the rest of the Arab world to the East.”

Dr. Edwards completed his Ph.D. in American Studies in 1998. His research on American representations of North Africa was published in 2005 by Duke University Press as *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America’s Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech*

Express. As its title suggests, the book's cultural sweep includes everything from Hollywood films sparked by General Patton's military campaign in North Africa to visits by the hippies of the Vietnam era who escaped to the Maghreb to forget the disillusionment at home.

Dr. Edwards brought an encyclopedic knowledge and critical acumen to *Morocco Bound*, says Dr. Ali Behdad, who chairs the department of comparative literature at the University of California-Los Angeles and worked with him on the Globalizing American Studies Project. "*Morocco Bound* is a lucid text which clearly defines its critical terms, powerfully substantiates its theoretical claims, and often delights its readers with apt and insightful formulations," Dr. Behdad continues. "Given its important critical interventions, it should be a required text for a broad range of readers and scholars in the fields of American studies, post-colonialism, comparative literature and Middle Eastern Studies."

The richness of the Maghreb, its complexities and contradictions, continues to influence Dr. Edwards' scholarly work and had an effect on his family life as well, once he had children of his own. He and his family spent a summer living in the Fez medina so that his three young children could experience Moroccan culture for themselves. "I wanted them to feel the particular space formed by the urban architecture of the Maghreb and the way walking through a medina, or sitting around a big dish of couscous, reaching in and grabbing the moist grains with your fingers, makes you feel part of a community larger than yourself," Dr. Edwards has written.

Dr. Edwards joined the Northwestern academic community in 2000 and has taught courses there on Comparative Orientalism, Cold War culture, representations of World War II, globalization and diaspora, among others. He is also a core faculty member in the Middle East and North African Studies group, an interdisciplinary faculty working group he co-founded, and directs the Globalizing American Studies Project there. A multi-year initiative, the project features a series of annual symposia that has brought an international network of scholars to Northwestern. Essays by Yale's Dr. Dimock, UCLA's Dr. Behdad and other scholars will appear in a book to be published by the University of Chicago Press in fall 2010, bearing the name of the project—*Globalizing American Studies*—co-edited by Dr. Edwards.

His love of literature continues to be a major influence on his scholarship, framing the way he approaches his work as an Americanist, Dr. Edwards says. His scholarly writing "leaves some things up to readers—which is what literature does, too." But there is nothing ambiguous about Dr. Edwards' regard for the influence and importance of popular culture, a cornerstone of the research he has conducted both in North Africa and the Middle East with Carnegie Corporation support. "One of the promises of this work," says Dr. Edwards, "is

that it shows how our culture moves through the world. Not just our movies and literature and music, but our higher education as well. Contemporary culture is the meeting place. It is in the realm of culture that there is the most potential for understanding each other.”

Dr. Edwards’ Corporation-supported research recognizes that U.S. culture does not flow uni-directionally but rather is responded to, and remade, by Arab and Iranian artists, intellectuals and youth within their own idiom for their own projects. As Dr. Edwards explains, “Young Arabs and Iranians, savvy in the workings of the digital technologies of globalization and consumers of multiple global cultures, American culture primarily among them, take on elements of American culture and borrow from, remake, or recode them for their own local—national—purposes. These purposes are often surprising and sometimes unintelligible to most Americans, as elements of American culture circulate along unpredicted pathways.” Moving beyond the simple formulations familiar from post-9/11 journalism, Dr. Edwards’ forthcoming book is groundbreaking in its firsthand examination of the ways American culture is received, and reformulated, in the Middle East.

His research for the new book is built on the bedrock of his earlier findings in Morocco. But Carnegie Corporation’s support has allowed him to “extend his work much further in terms of region, approach, and by moving it into the complex conditions of globalization,” Dr. Edwards notes.

Figuring out how far to extend those boundaries was, in itself, a project for Dr. Edwards. During the summer of 2005, he recalls making significant progress in deciding about the interdisciplinary range of materials—historical, theoretical, sociological—in which American culture circulates. “Intrigued by the parallels between Cold War ideas about public and cultural diplomacy and those in the post-9/11 environment, I did research on the Cold War period as well as in materials on the present,” he says.

There was also field work to do. Dr. Edwards says he wanted to study dynamic social and learning centers in North Africa and the Middle East that would provide “a cross-section of the region and a range of possibilities and responses to America.” And as if that were not challenging enough, he also sought “key cities of the next decade, at various levels of stability, with societies that range from moderate to hostile in their relationships to the U.S.” His early choices were Fez (Morocco), Cairo (Egypt), and Tehran (Iran) and, to a lesser extent, Beirut (Lebanon) and Tunis (Tunisia). However, Dr. Edwards found it extremely difficult to keep all five research sites simultaneously in play, even before factoring in the political volatility of Lebanon and Iran. He therefore eventually tightened his focus to concentrate on Fez, Cairo and Tehran.

His success in these cities relied on some creative strategies. In Fez, he established a vital research team by mentoring students there. In Tehran, he created a similar student network and built on his great interest in contemporary Iranian cinema. In Cairo, conversations with a new generation of Egyptian writers at an avante garde publishing house revealed that U.S. comics and graphic novels were among their inspirations. And during the summer of 2006, he developed an interactive web site, Global Culture in Local Circulation (<http://www.wcas.northwestern.edu/projects/globalization/>), linking students at Tehran University, the University of Fez, and Northwestern University.

In addition to the web site, Dr. Edwards' project was enriched by many sources of information, including ethnographic observation, interviews, and primary research in media, cinema, contemporary literature and in classrooms. "As I became increasingly persuaded that that the rise of American Studies in the region was an important component of this book project, I had the additional challenge of researching a cultural phenomenon in motion," Dr. Edwards recounts.

The project took his language skills in a new direction as well. Dr. Edwards has taken the time to study Persian (Farsi) at Northwestern and at the University of Chicago since being awarded the Carnegie Corporation fellowship, and added a second dialect of Arabic (Egyptian) to his knowledge of Moroccan Arabic.

Wide dissemination of the findings from his rich multiple sources is very important to Dr. Edwards, who says he is "totally committed" to public scholarship, especially after receiving the communications training provided to Carnegie Scholars by the Corporation's Dissemination Program. Along the way, he says, he "developed a voice and writerly tone to bring in a larger audience for this research." In that regard, he adds, "I have lectured to both academic and non-academic audiences on this research, including the Women's Foreign Policy Group at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C.; the Yale Club of Chicago; the Annenberg School at USC in Los Angeles, where the audience included numerous people from the entertainment industry and the school of public diplomacy at USC; as well as on public radio and Internet radio. Alongside my scholarly publications I have written a number of essays and op-eds for [print and online publications] including *The Believer*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Foreign Policy* and *Huffington Post*." Dr. Edwards speaks enthusiastically about the first of these publications as an especially influential venue that brings new audiences to public scholarship on the Arab world: "It's a wide-circulation monthly culture magazine that is extremely popular with, and highly esteemed by, Generation Y."

He also speaks energetically about bringing a portfolio of work by young Egyptian

writers to the pages of *A Public Space*, a well-regarded New York City-based literary journal, for which he guest edited and introduced a 50-page portfolio of new Egyptian fiction, literary nonfiction, and an original comic. This project involved not only field research and interviews, but also commissioning translations from both literary and Egyptian colloquial Arabic. (Edwards did several of the Arabic translations himself.)

In his introduction to the Cairo portfolio, Dr. Edwards calls the new generation “Cairo 2010”—writers and artists who have emerged on the Egyptian literary scene since the disappointment of “Kefaya,” the short-lived political protest in 2004-05. His work here is a first taste of a longer chapter that is part of *After the American Century*. In his introduction to the portfolio in *A Public Space*, published in the fall of 2009, he notes: “These writers are a generation that came of age with (sometimes after) the massive arrival of the Internet and digital technologies in Cairo, and in the wake of the shift in global discourse about big words like democracy, Islam, and war. And while many of the topics they address in their work seem much smaller—a sexual liaison, street children stealing fruit, women calling on each other for tea, two boys playing a video game—these are not writers unconcerned with the social or the political. Rather, their work is conceived differently in relation to the big questions. Perhaps it is the enormity of Cairo, expanding at asymptotic rates via apparently uncontrollable urbanization, or the response to its social and political *zahma* [blockage]; or perhaps they echo others in their generation internationally who have become cynical about what art and writing can do and seek something different. But the big pronouncements here are more muted or ironic...and sometimes they are even refused.”

In sharing his findings, Dr. Edwards has extensively taught and lectured abroad—in Egypt, India, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. In winter 2007 he was a visiting faculty member at the University of Tehran’s Institute for North American Studies, an experience he wrote about in “American Studies in Tehran,” an essay published in the prestigious scholarly journal *Public Culture* (his essay was subsequently selected as a “Notable Essay of 2007” in *The Best American Essays 2008*, the first time the journal had garnered such a coveted honor). In the spring of 2007, he taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. During 2008-09, as a recipient of a New Directions Fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, he was on leave to pursue training in socio-cultural anthropology and Middle Eastern studies, as well as advanced Arabic and Persian, at the University of Chicago. And in 2009 he traveled to Cairo as a Fulbright Senior Specialist to help develop American Studies programs at Cairo University-Giza.

Dr. Edwards’ many scholarly successes stem in part from his willingness to

experiment with research methodologies in anthropology and Arabic studies that colleagues with backgrounds in history or English would not necessarily attempt, according to Northwestern's Dr. Wachtel. "His research project for Carnegie Corporation showcases all that he has been able to put together," Dr. Wachtel says. "The result will be, I think, to show us in exceptionally fresh ways what it means to 'study America,' and how powerful that desire is, even in venues where we would least expect to find it going on."