

Book Review: *An Imagined America: Language, Literacy, Identity, and Coloniality at Syrian Protestant College, 1866–1920*

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Reading Lisa Arnold's *An Imagined America: Language, Literacy, Identity, and Coloniality at Syrian Protestant College, 1866–1920*, I recalled the rhetoric and memes surrounding Colin Kaepernick's protest of police brutality. Kaepernick is a black man who played professional American football, and in 2016, after several unarmed black men were shot by police at different traffic stops, he knelt in protest during the United States national anthem. The backlash across media was that, despite his silent, nonviolent protest, he was still protesting "wrong," and he was framed as ungrateful for his opportunity to play American football. Kaepernick's silent protest revealed his belief in an imagined America that championed nonviolent protest by black men and yet was met with harsh public polemics. In Arnold's account, the first student protest of the Arab region was cultivated by Arab students' own beliefs of their imagined America and was also met with backlash from the (mostly white) American university administration. This rhetoric regarding the right way to protest and who gets to protest is a throughline of Lisa Arnold's *Imagined America*, which illustrates how Syrian Protestant College (SPC) administrations construct a colonizing apparatus through language and how students negotiate their developing identities through written language and desire.

Working in the archives of the American University of Beirut (formerly the SPC), Arnold traces SPC student identity construction through language and literacy practices. As she does this, she calls on composition and rhetoric scholars to recognize that the discipline's roots are built on racist understandings of language and writing and to "delink" our scholarship and pedagogies from its colonial roots and "recognize and value the existence of pluriversal literacy practices and pedagogies in the discipline's history, present, and future" (p. 92). According to Arnold, writing has always been multilingual, and our students have always negotiated their developing selves multilingually. As such, our classrooms and scholarship should enable and champion multilingual possibilities as well.

Chapters one through three frame the discussion in terms of decolonization and translingual frameworks, trace the history of the SPC, and analyze how the SPC created an assemblage of America through its education. She creates a theoretical foundation arguing that writing studies has always been transnational and translingual and claiming that writing studies' lack of investigations into the United States' colonial literacy projects "has worked to conceal and devalue alternative conceptions of" language and literacy practices (p. 13). Arnold spends chapter two revealing the tensions and negotiations of literacy practices in Ottoman-ruled Syria by illustrating how foreign missionaries cultivated what she calls "the imagined America" through literacy education. Here, she frames how United States literacy practices create a colonizing foundation through language. Chapter three continues the background of the SPC as Arnold traces the institution's language policy decisions and the switch from being an Arabic-medium university to an English-medium university by the fall of 1879. Arnold roots this chapter in the claim that Syrian residents were already making language choices between English, French, and Arabic, and these choices signify changing business, education,

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and power models, regardless of administrative decision-making. Analyzing archived documents, Arnold posits the switch to English was successful not only for its ability to “civilize,’ but also because it provided a practical solution for the college in maintaining a balance of power that supported the college’s American faculty and administration” (p. 81). Arnold ends this chapter asking readers to consider that if we are truly to be a discipline of social justice, how can we integrate all language practices in our classrooms?

Arnold provides evidence of the multilingual negotiations of SPC students in chapters four and five. She argues the translingual writing and interactions indicate how students are constructing their “imagined America” and their multilingual identities. Chapter four presents artifacts from two protests: the 1882 “Lewis Affair” and the 1909 “Muslim Controversy.” Through these protests, Arnold illustrates how education, mission, and identity collide among trustees, faculty, and students, and how language(s), languaging, and written documents fuel the complexities (and reveal the colonization) of student identity within the transnational, translingual American university. The Lewis Affair protest occurred after the forced resignation of Dr. Edwin Lewis, who was forced to resign from the Protestant college after a pro-Darwin speech. Arnold contends that student expulsion following the student protest in reaction to Lewis’ resignation illustrates a disconnect between the students’ imagined America and the institution’s colonial epistemology framed through literacy education. In chapter five, with the assistance of translators Ghada Seifeddine and Dr. Yasmina Abou Taha, Arnold illustrates how SPC students “composed America” through the analysis of over 50 English and Arabic newspapers found in the AUB archives. She argues language choice and identity forging is evident among students, as Arabic is used to critique the homeland while English is used for neutral statements. French and Armenian are also present in the newspapers of the archives. Arnold indicates that students saw the newspapers as a way to develop their national identity and “speak back to the West” through the promotion of Arabic and the practice of English. Calling back to chapter four, she reminds readers that protest and “speaking back” are practices limited to Americans in the United States, which students become aware of when faced with the consequences of their protest and writing. This furthers Arnold’s point regarding writing studies’ complicity with colonial education. Her argument suggests as MENA and transnational writing faculty, our writing program missions and writing pedagogy philosophies must recognize that teaching English-only writing rules and genres impairs the identity-formation and agency of our students and, as Arnold notes, reinforces the complacency that the transnational university desires.

Arnold’s final chapter draws six conclusions: 1) there are connections between power, language, and literacy education, and our students are always negotiating those relationships both for themselves and for their imagined communities, 2) the weight of English changes based on context, and those contexts can be institutionalized and high stakes, or they can be student-made and unpolished, 3) literacy education has roots in colonialism, and it is a colonizing apparatus, 4) identity is negotiated through language, and this can be witnessed across students and faculty in archival documents, 5) the opportunities (and ceilings) of language learning transnationally, and 6) the negotiation of multiple literacies, despite enacting monolingual policies, indicates agency-driven language choice.

The merits of this text, especially for the region and for transnational writing practices, are twofold: articulating how students voice their concerns regarding education and illustrating the ways students reveal their linguistic choices and compose in a translingual fashion. Importantly, while performing these rhetorical acts, Arnold cultivates the argument that students are also performing through language choice and rhetorical decision-making. As students built their imagined America, they thought they were building the right to protest within an American institution. But the administration had its own imagined America, which manufactured hierarchical power relations between the West and Near East, administrations and students, and native and non-native speakers. The administration's imagined America reminds the SPC student that their multilingual actions are insubordinate at best and uncivilized at worst, no matter how peaceful or rhetorically appropriate. Through engaging with chapters four and five in particular, which showcase student writing, transnational composition instructors and writing administrators can begin to see how multilingual and translingual compositions can emerge from classrooms and extracurricular university spaces.

Arnold's text is a dense, demanding read. She asks her reader to consider the identity desires of the multilingual student, and how adhering to university administrations is reinforcing a colonizing apparatus. By the end of her book, I was left wondering how writing faculty in the region can develop pedagogies in our classrooms and across our campuses that begin to "delink the colonial legacy of English from the history of rhetoric and writing studies" (p. 91). Throughout the text, Arnold points to institutional infrastructure (both domestic and transnational) as a form of soft power which, through epistemological frames of education, dictates language and protest. She is speaking directly to composition theorists when calling on decolonial and transnational theories to discuss language and identity. Practically speaking, I'm left wanting to know more about the transnational, translingual pedagogies I can employ to enable multilingual and translingual writing. How can the MENA writing classroom meet outcomes while promoting the language choices, identity formations, and local community empowerment of its transnational, translingual students? How does encouraging multilingual composing disrupt the colonial project?

References

Arnold, L. R. (2025). *An imagined America: Language, literacy, identity, and coloniality at Syrian Protestant College, 1866–1920*. The WAC Clearinghouse; University Press of Colorado. <https://doi.org/10.37514/INT-B.2025.2678>

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