New Alum Crosses International and Intercultural Barriers
by Callyn Weintraub

When Fatima Zahrae (PhD ‘14, communication; MA ‘10, international and intercultural communication) came to DU from Morocco for her master’s degree, she quickly established her “home away from home” within the departments of media, film and journalism studies (MFJS) and communication studies. Her past six years at DU have resulted in a master’s, a doctorate and a chance to turn her dissertation into a book at a new post-doctoral position at Georgetown University, which she recently accepted.

Zahrae came to DU on a Fulbright Scholarship to study international and intercultural communication.

“The collaborative aspect of this joint degree between the department of media, film & journalism studies and the Josef Korbel School of International Studies is what drew me to join DU. I was especially interested in the diverse content and methodological orientations of the program, which engage scholarship and experience both locally and globally,” she said.

In the second year of her master’s program, she took a class entitled *Voices of Women of Color* with Bernadette Calafell, associate professor in communication studies. “She introduced me to new ways of understanding, examining and theorizing knowledge production by non-normative voices and bodies,” Zahrae explained. “Dr. Calafell nurtured my aspiration for academic research and motivated my love for intellectual pursuits, and that’s how I ended up in the PhD program.”

“As an international student of color, my experiences at DU have been very diverse,” she continued. “At the beginning of my journey, I struggled finding my voice on campus. However, I found a supportive community and a family in MFJS and communication studies.”

As a member of the Graduate Student Government, Zahrae has been working with the rest of the board on a social justice project that focuses on inclusiveness of marginalized identities, with a goal of full integration of minorities on campus and in the larger community.
One of her most memorable experiences at DU was the opportunity to design and teach her own course, entitled *Culture, Gender, and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*.

“Through an interdisciplinary scope, I was able to bridge the fields of communication studies and Middle Eastern studies by addressing key issues in the study of communication and culture in the Middle East. This course gave me a space of possibility where I created an open site for meaningful dialogue in the classroom, and increased students’ self-reflexivity and their awareness of critical issues regarding culture, sexuality, gender, race and class in the region. It also helped me establish mentoring relationships with my students, which I still carry today.”

As a recipient of the AHSS Divisional Dissertation Fellowship, Zahrae was able to conduct research on the Arab Spring and write her dissertation, “The Vernacular Discourse of the ‘Arab Spring.’” The fellowship helped to cover some of the costs of her ethnographic work for data collection in Tunisia.

“My dissertation project meets the mission of the communication studies department at DU as it answers questions of how we can identify better communicative ways to understand different cultural groups in order to bring cultures together to consistently feed each other, and coexist with one another based on solutions that call for dialogue and humanization,” she said.

“More specifically, 9/11 and the succeeding moment of trauma in the U.S. enabled narratives that target the ‘unknown’ Other through the reiteration of the ‘popular’ phrase ‘Why do they hate us?’ Hence, this dissertation project advances the mission of the department as it is committed to the premise that scholarship is a powerful tool for fostering and promoting social justice, in the academy and beyond.”

Zahrae credits DU for her personal and professional development, as well as leading her to future opportunities.

“Since I came to DU in 2008, I’ve grown as a person, a scholar, and a teacher. My education at DU helped me develop my professional career both at the national and international levels from presenting at conferences and seminars to publishing. My education at DU has opened up doors for me that I’ve never dreamt of!”