On the first day of my undergraduate “Andalusian Iberias” seminar, I distribute a multilingual and multisciprual handout of a *kharja* (pl. *kharajā*) composed by Ibn al-Rāfi’ Ra’suh, an eleventh-century poet from Toledo. The mixture of Ibero-Romance and Arabic that comprises this refrain, found, as the Arabic word *kharaja* (to leave) implies, at the end of an Arabic strophic poem, piques students’ curiosity: “Was the earliest extant Spanish verse really written in Arabic script?” they ask. Over the course of the conversation, this initial curiosity turns to terror: “Must we know Arabic, not to mention Hebrew, Latin, Catalan, Portuguese, and Provençal, in order to take this course? Isn’t this an upper-level Spanish elective?” I assure my students, typically no more than ten, that although knowledge of Spanish and English suffices, we will also read Spanish texts alongside works of theology, philosophy, and literature translated from those other languages. One goal of this approach is to see whether Spanish literature looks different when studied within this interwoven Iberian fabric. But we aim also to read works from beyond the Spanish tradition on their own terms, paying attention to their generic conventions and circumstances of production and circulation. In this way, Spanish literature serves as a gateway into the cultural complexity of the Iberian Peninsula, so splendidly epitomized by Ibn al-Rāfi’ Ra’suh’s *kharja*.

By reading works produced between the eighth-century Berber invasions and the seventeenth-century expulsions of peninsular Muslim converts to Christianity, known as Moriscos, we pose the relationship among the different Iberian religious communities and literary traditions.
as methodological questions: What constitutes historical evidence of cross-cultural encounter? How might we chart currents of literary influence through the meandering tributaries of translation, polemic, and patronage? When to employ economic, aesthetic, or religious categories of analysis? In my view, courses on medieval and early modern Iberian literature should be comparative in design and content, but they must also question the institutional conditions and methodological assumptions driving comparison. Let us follow Américo Castro in disputing Spanish nationalist history and María Rosa Menocal in interrogating the “myth of Westernness,” I tell my students, but let us also use the variety of Andalusian Iberias that emerge from comparative study to think critically about such approaches.2

Especially since September 11, 2001, students come to classes on the history and representation of premodern Christians, Muslims, and Jews aware that contemporary politics of religion shape interpretations of the past. Research on medieval convivencia and early modern inquisition, for instance, are in part products of a present characterized by alarmism about shari‘ah law in the United States, angst over public displays of piety in France, and global uproar around free speech and religious tolerance in Denmark.3 By addressing the approaches of previous specialists, from early modern editors and literary critics to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philologists, we can encourage students to scrutinize the history as well as the present of scholarship and teaching about the Iberian Peninsula. To cultivate historicizing habits is to foster both close and distant reading skills.

In what follows, I describe the organization and content of my Andalusian Iberias syllabus, further address the above pedagogical, methodological, and political issues, and offer pragmatic teaching suggestions. Scholars of Mediterranean studies, tolerance and intolerance, regionalism, material culture, and a host of other issues have employed the Iberian Peninsula as a laboratory for testing new interpretations and disciplinary structures; I hope the same might become true for teachers of cross-cultural encounters seeking to experiment with their course designs and goals.

The Syllabus

According to Castro’s and Menocal’s narratives, Iberian cultural and intellectual history is upside down. While much of Europe was mired in the Dark Ages, Cordoba, Seville, Granada, and Toledo were hubs of philosophical learning and artistic patronage. Here was medieval tolerance in a crusader age. Likewise, when the roots of Enlightenment took hold...