

Peddling an Arab American History:  
Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Early Syrian American Communities

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## Explanation of Terms

Ethnic, cultural and racial terms—their definitions, uses, and slippages of meaning—play significant roles in the history of race for migrants from West Asia and North Africa. It is thus important to enumerate my use of certain terms. Naming in racial and ethnic identity is a complicated practice that is fraught with contradictions and exclusions. With the understanding that there is no “perfect” way to label ourselves or each other, that there exists no way to satisfy the many contentions of essentialism or exclusion that naming entails, I will explain here my choices for the labels I do employ.

Some feminist and queer critiques have generated an alternative geographically based descriptor—Southwest Asian and North African or SWANA. According to Nadine Naber, this term disrupts the imperialist narrative of “Middle Eastern” while also pushing against “patriarchal and homophobic nationalisms” and including in its rubric non-Arabs from the region who share a similar history.<sup>1</sup> While I think each of these critiques is valid, because this project intentionally addresses “Arab American studies” as an emerging discipline and the specific history of *Arabs* in the United States, I will mainly use the terms “Arab” and “Arab American” in this dissertation to refer to people whose origins (either birth or ancestral) are in West (or Southwest) Asia and North Africa but who reside (even temporarily) in the United States. I find it critical to reclaim “Arab” politically in the United States, in order to resist the systematic and singular associations

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1. Nadine Naber, “Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations,” in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, eds. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 9.

of “Arab” with “terrorist” and the many obfuscations those associations entail. Of course, the use of the term “Arab” would have a different significance if I was writing and working from a different locale. When speaking more generally about people who have ancestral roots in the “Middle East,” including those who do not identify as or are not ethnically considered Arab, I refer to the people of “West Asia and North Africa.” Finally, I use the term “Syrian” to denote people coming from the region of Greater Syria under the Ottoman Empire (the present-day regions of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel/Palestine), which constituted the first significant wave of Arab migration to and through the United States before World War II. “Syrian” is also the term that these migrants used to refer to themselves during the time period in question. Thus I use these terms tentatively, and with the knowledge that they are always contingent upon context and strategy.

## Introduction

Down the street he comes, a man apart, knowing no friend; his queer dress, his hooked nose, his broken speech and queer mannerisms set him aside from the rest—the peddler of rugs. On his arm, a gaudy display of rugs and scarfs [*sic*], gleaming like jewels in the sunlight. Sparkling tinsel and glistening silk, yet alas, they bear no blessing of a known manufacturer, a thing made only to sell through the picturing of the faults of others. Bearing a guarantee of a foreigner who you will perhaps never see again. Nor are the political rugs exemplified by the candidacy of Dr. M. Shadid of any better quality. These rugs too glisten in the light of hard times; they are smooth, but what lies under the surface?—Will they, like the peddler’s rug, fade, will they become a thing forsaken, dirty, unfit to have around? After the first washing, what will we have?...No American parentage glorifies this person, and no American philosophy blesses his doctrine. We need no off-color Jews as congressmen, nor do we need off-color capital-baiting lines of thought in our national make-up.  
—“The Peddler of Rugs”<sup>2</sup>

In 1927, Dr. Michael Shadid, a resident of Elk City, Oklahoma, found himself the victim of social isolation in Elk City and backlash in the Syrian American community, due to the presence of the Ku Klux Klan and Shadid’s public comments about racism in the United States. Shadid was born in 1882 in Marj’ayoun, a town in what is known today as southern Lebanon. At the time of Shadid’s birth, it was part of Syria, a large, Ottoman-ruled province in West Asia.<sup>3</sup> Shadid came to the United States in 1898, worked as a traveling peddler for a short time, and eventually settled in Oklahoma, after living in Texas and getting his medical license in St. Louis. As an Arab, an immigrant, and a proponent of cooperative medicine living during the Ku Klux Klan’s virulent resurgence

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2. “The Peddler of Rugs,” *The Vici Beacon*, 1927, Elk City, Oklahoma.

3. Ottoman-held Syria, also called Greater Syria or *bilad al-sham* in Arabic, covered the geographies of present-day Lebanon, Syria, Israel/Occupied Palestine, and parts of Jordan.

in Oklahoma, Shadid attracted attention. In February, Shadid wrote to *The Syrian World*, an English-language periodical for the Syrian American community, and told the editors of his experience with the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma. Dr. Shadid wrote that, despite his success as a physician, he was socially ostracized by Klan members because of his race. Shadid then made two provocative claims: first, Syrians were not welcome in the United States because of their race; and second, Syrians should return to Syria, where they were needed to contribute to and advance the economy. The response to Shadid's letter from the Syrian American community was prolific. Readers and the editors of *The Syrian World* responded to rebut the assertion that they were racially ostracized, often arguing that Shadid's experience were specific to Elk City and not characteristic of the United States as a whole. Shadid also responded to these rebuttals to affirm that he had experienced the same discrimination in several other U.S. locales in which he had lived before moving to Oklahoma. Readers especially rejected the notion that Syrians should return to Syria (despite the fact that many Syrians *did* return rather than live out the remainder of their lives in diaspora). The debate about racism and Syrians' belonging in the United States raged on for several months in the pages of *The Syrian World*.<sup>4</sup> Shadid eventually recanted his position that Syrians should return to Syria, after a trip with his American-born children that convinced him that their American lives were incompatible

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4. Raouf J. Halaby, "Dr. Michael Shadid and the Debate over Identity in *The Syrian World*," in *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-speaking Immigrants to the United States Before 1940*, ed. Eric J. Hooglund (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 55-65.

with Syrian living.<sup>5</sup> He maintained that Syrians suffered racial discrimination in the United States.

The same year as the debate in *The Syrian World*, Shadid ran for United States Congress as a socialist. The epigraph shows one public attempt at discrediting Shadid's candidacy that was printed in a local paper, *The Vici Beacon*. Through using the figure of the peddler, specifically the Arab peddler, as a metaphor for empty campaign promises, the editorial cast Shadid as a distrustful and unqualified candidate and highlighted his foreignness. This strategy was predicated upon the popular circulation of the Syrian peddler as deceptive and manipulative, a foreigner with no roots in any community and no loyalty to the United States. The "glistening," "gleaming," and even "gaudy display" of the peddler's rugs and scarves was part of the allure of the Syrian peddler: the peddler brought "exotic" items to the doorsteps of working-class Americans. Customers were both excited and repelled by the cultural and racial difference that peddlers sold. This portrayal of peddling also highlights the link between Syrian racialization and anti-Jewish sentiment. Shadid was called an "off-color Jew" as a way to differentiate him from "Americans" in both racial and ethno-religious terms, and the "hooked nose" was a common stereotype about Ashkenazi Jews. The editorial also describes the peddler as "queer." Certainly, given the rest of the description and the common usage of the term "queer" at this time, the queerness was a strangeness that highlighted the peddler's cultural and racial difference from the communities in which he peddled. But since the

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5. Halaby, "Dr. Michael Shadid," 62-63; Michael Shadid, *Crusading Doctor: My Fight for Cooperative Medicine* (Boston: Meador Publishing Co., 1956), 29; *Syrian World* 3, 9 (October 1928), 24-28.

late nineteenth century, the term queer had already begun to take on the additional meaning of male effeminacy and (male) sexual deviance. Syrian peddlers in the United States were rendered *other* through descriptions like these that emphasized their cultural and racial deviations from whiteness; but Syrian peddlers were also sensationalized because of their perceived gendered and sexual difference from white American heteronormativity, which re-inscribed them as racially different. Thus, the “queer” in this editorial served a dual purpose, invoking foreignness and a potential sexual/gender difference via Orientalism. Despite Shadid’s commitment to the Elk City community, he was defeated in the election. Still, Shadid and his family continued to live in Elk City and eventually he won a long battle to open the first cooperatively-run hospital in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

The experiences of Michael Shadid, and the accusations leveled against him, are indicative of the complexities of early Arab American communities and race. Shadid was both successful and ostracized, someone who had access to many opportunities only afforded to “white” Americans, and was a naturalized U.S. citizen who, for some time, advocated for the return to his native country because of racial discrimination. Despite these complexities, historical accounts and analysis of the early Arab American community have preferred to understand Arab migrants and their American-born children as successfully integrating into American society and, implicitly, “ascending” into

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6. Shadid, *Crusading Doctor*.

whiteness,<sup>7</sup> highlighting the community's contributions to the United States rather than the injustices done unto them. Indeed, by 1915, Syrians had been ruled legally "white" at the level of the district court. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many immigrant groups struggled to naturalize as U.S. citizens, sparking far-reaching debates about race, whiteness, and assimilation. Naturalization statutes at this time had "racial prerequisites" that the petitioner be "white" or of African birth or descent.<sup>8</sup> Despite the many social and legal debates in overtly racial terms surrounding the place of various immigrant groups in the United States, including many Europeans, European immigrants were granted naturalization without judicial contest. However, non-Europeans' petitions were decided in the courts, the overwhelming majority of whom claimed to be "white." While the conglomeration of cases show many contradicting opinions about what "white" meant and who could be considered as such, West Asians—including Syrians, Turks, Armenians, and Persians—were the only non-Europeans to be ruled legally white and granted naturalization rights. The context surrounding these naturalization cases was not only the more recent influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, but also the relatively recent emancipation and internal migration of African Americans after the

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7. Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Gualtieri's work is a notable exception to this trend. The "ascension" into whiteness refers to a play called *Anna Ascends*, written by Henry Chapman Ford, in which a Syrian immigrant woman learns English, Americanizes herself, and wins a white male suitor. See Gualtieri's chapter "Marriage and Respectability" in *Between Arab and White*.

8. Section 2169 of the Revised Statutes (1878) stipulated that anyone wanting to naturalize must be considered "a free white person" or a person "of African nativity or African descent."

Civil War and the long-standing anti-Asian sentiment pervading all immigration debates and policy.

Following in the footsteps of recent Arab American studies scholarship, this dissertation challenges the traditional characterization of early Arab migration in the United States as being a linear path of assimilation into whiteness and instead foregrounds the shifting and uncertain nature of Arab American racialization before World War II. This dissertation also foregrounds what it means to produce narratives about this early Arab American community and asks Arab American studies to think critically about the place of early Arab American communities and histories within our field. For these early Arab Americans, not only was race an unstable process in this context but it was also defined in relation to other racialized groups, particularly black Americans and other immigrants from the Asian continent. Sarah Gualtieri's work on race in the early Arab American community shows that even after the period of naturalization cases and the legal victory of Syrian whiteness, Syrians continued to be perceived "somewhere in between the poles of 'Asian' and 'black.'"<sup>9</sup> Syrian migrants' racial position was thus one of "inbetweenness,"<sup>10</sup> wherein Syrians inhabited ambiguous racial positions and more often than not articulated what they were *not*, in racial terms (i.e. "not black", "not Asian"), rather than what they were. Arab American racialization thus unfolded *in relation* to other racialized groups, particularly African Americans,

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9. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 4.

10. Ibid.; James R. Barret and David Roediger. "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, 3 (1997), 3-44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502194>.

Asian migrants/Asian Americans, and Ashkenazi Jews. At the same time, this dissertation strives to make visible the other demands of normativity that assimilation and whiteness entail. In particular, I ask how norms of gendered roles, sexual behavior, religious identity and class expectations work in tandem with ideas about race to produce the discourse in which Syrians located articulations of what it meant to be ‘Syrian’, ‘American’ and immigrants in the United States. And I ask what particular norms were articulated. A guiding assumption of my project is that, as migrants from West Asia sought to survive in a U.S. context of racial hierarchy and hostility toward immigrants, a particular set of sexual, gender, and class expectations and articulations of religious identity were inextricable from claims to whiteness. However, I am also interested in the effect of deviations from these norms on racial discourse: did deviations constitute threats to a white Syrian American identity? In particular, what practices, encounters, and discourses marred Syrian claims of whiteness?

Thus, my research is an intersectional analysis of racialization in and of the early Arab American community. By this, I mean that, while centering the mapping of racial identities and concepts onto human bodies and populations, I aim to understand how the imperatives of gender roles, sexual behavior, class, and religious identity (and equally the challenges to those imperatives) were mutually constitutive with processes of racialization for these earliest of Arab Americans. Although these boundaries are not impermeable, I have attributed the temporal bookends of 1874 (when Syrians began arriving in the United States) and the beginning years of the Cold War as encompassing the early Arab American community. This allows me to examine the lives of Arab

migrants and their American-born children in the scope of my research.

Significant analysis has been done regarding the legal classifications of Syrian migrants by the census, immigration officials, and the law (in naturalization cases).<sup>11</sup> This work has been integral to understanding the paradoxes of Arab American racialization history. However, the spaces of Syrian migrant life that don't focus on legal institutions have been less scrutinized and reveal a different process of racialization than Syrian migrants' interactions with legal institutions.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, a different archival focus allows for different stories of Arab American history to be told. I look at archival sites where gender and sexuality are at the forefront of conversations about the racial belonging or incompatibility of Arabs in the U.S. national body. Sites that do not center squarely upon the law allow for an enumeration of how race shifted within and outside of legal conversations and how gender and sexuality mediated concepts of race for Arab immigrants. Specifically, this dissertation uses academic, cultural-nationalist, social work, and ethnic-nationalist archives, all of which have been produced in relation to the U.S. state. Each chapter in this dissertation focuses on a different archive: chapter one centers on an archive of academic knowledge production, chapter two focuses on an archive of U.S. culture (a cultural-nationalist archive), chapter three focuses on the social

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11. Kim Benita Furumoto and David Theo Goldberg, "Boundaries of the Racial State: Two Faces of Racial Exclusion in the United States Law," *Harvard Black Letter Law Journal* 17(2001), 85.; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).; Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*.; Ian Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

12. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 4.

welfare archive, and chapter four examines an Arab American archive (an ethnic-nationalist archive).

My research focuses on a specific figure of Arab American history—the Arab migrant peddler of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—to show that the scrutiny and representation of Arab American peddling practices and economic networks reveal how dominant ideas about gender and sexual difference are at the root of Arab American racialization. The policing and disciplining of Arab American labor practices—which existed in tension with racialized norms of gender, sexuality, and class—produced the figure of the Syrian peddler. Thus, I look to the practices and economic networks of peddling, as well as representations of Syrian peddlers themselves, as a rich site for intersectional analysis of racialization, because of its temporary and transitory nature and because of its dependence upon interactions between Syrian migrants and others away from large Syrian communities, where scrutiny regarding social norms was certain. Looking at the early period of Arab immigration to the United States also reveals the deep entrenchment of Orientalist conceptions of Arabs in the American psyche and the extent to which these ideas are tied to gender and sexual normativity. This research also demonstrates why race in early Arab America is an important locus of study for women and gender studies and, inversely, why gender and sexuality are important loci for Arab American studies.

Since their arrival in the United States in significant numbers in the late 1870s, the majority of migrants from the Ottoman province of Greater Syria found employment through pack peddling. Most of these migrants were Christian and emigrated largely from

the region of Mount Lebanon. Peddling did not require much capital in order to begin and was open to anyone, regardless of one's knowledge of the English language. Peddlers would travel in groups or alone and leave for days, weeks, or even months at a time to travel the surrounding countryside or longer distances. Syrian peddlers sold household dry goods and notions, such as needles and thread, linens, belts, and soap. But Syrians also sold what Americans viewed as "exotic" commodities, such as silks, perfumes, rugs, and rosaries from 'the Holy Land.' For many Syrian migrants, peddling allowed them to amass wealth quickly, which was often sent home to family members in Syria, used to purchase land, a house, or a business, or used to return to Syria to live. For others, peddling was not the lucrative career they had hoped for (and more often than not been told by their compatriots), and they moved on to other pursuits.

Although they were not the only immigrant group to peddle in the United States, Arab migrant peddlers were unique in several ways. First, Syrian Americans, both individually and as a community, had a "deep and broad" identification with peddling<sup>13</sup>—whether they themselves were peddlers or not. Second, a significant number of Syrian women peddled, including girls, single women, and married women. As a result of her extensive research with second-generation Arab Americans, historian Alixa Naff estimated that up to 80% of Syrian migrant women peddled at some point in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Peddling has had a central place in Arab American historical narratives as being the key to the "success" of Syrian migrants' integration into U.S. society, because it

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13. Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 130.

14. *Ibid*, 178.

enabled the dispersal of Syrians beyond urban enclaves (i.e. “Syrian colonies”), it was an easy way to earn money, and it allowed for contact between Syrians and other U.S. residents.<sup>15</sup> However, pack peddling was also gendered labor and attracted scrutiny as such: peddling has been cited as a venue in which non-traditional living arrangements between women were observed and as a means for unconventional family structures.<sup>16</sup> Such arrangements of support usually happened when long-distance peddlers, often men, were away from home for long periods of time. Thus, peddling was a contested topic within early Syrian American communities and among American commentators, and provoked great disagreement about the place of Syrians in the United States, race and assimilation, nationalism, and gender and sexuality within Syrian communities.

This work thus depends upon and expands histories of immigrant peddlers in the United States. Syrians were not the most numerous in the peddling profession. Ashkenazi Jews predominated, especially German Jews, continuing a common profession of the Jewish diaspora. The association of European Jews with peddling is also the most recognizable association when it comes to immigrant peddling in U.S. history. Vivek Bald’s recent work on the overlooked aspects of early South Asian American history elucidates the extensive multiracial network of Bengali Muslim peddlers who were rooted in Black and Creole communities during the same time period as Syrian

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15. Naff, *Becoming American*.

16. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 143-145.

peddlers.<sup>17</sup> Syrian peddlers share similarities with both of these groups. Stereotypes of Syrian peddlers often used the same anti-Jewish language that described Ashkenazi ones, most notably that they were greedy and manipulative. Like Bengali Muslim peddlers, Syrians capitalized on the increasing popularity of items from “the Orient” by selling things like lace and silk along side the household staples buyers would expect. But what is different from both of these groups is the prominence of Syrian women in the peddling population and the ways that both male and female Syrian peddlers were viewed and discussed in overtly gendered and sexual terms.

This project looks to the period of largely Christian Arab migration to and within the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for a different perspective on Arab American racialization and whiteness. I trace the anxieties surrounding Syrian migrant peddlers and their economic networks at the turn of the twentieth century and argue that the profession of pack peddling, which employed large numbers of Syrian men and women, constituted Arab immigrants as at once racial and sexual ‘others.’ While their presence was a source of anxiety, their commodities, labor, and racial and cultural difference were necessary for the formation of white, heteronormative domestic space. I demonstrate that the transience of male Syrian peddlers and the gender and sexual transgressions of female Syrian peddlers also posed a threat to claims of Syrian whiteness. I use theoretical frameworks from women of color feminist theory, post-colonial history, queer theory, and cultural studies to read for both the presences and

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17. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

absences of the Syrian peddler in archives of popular culture, social welfare, and the early Arab American community. My project asks, what gendered and sexual aspects of peddling work moved Arab Americans toward whiteness? And what of this moved Arab Americans toward “Asian,” “Black,” or eventually “Arab”?

#### METHODOLOGY: HISTORY, INTERDISCIPLINARITY, GENDER, & SEXUALITY

As an interdisciplinary historian, my methodological investments are in productive conflict with each other. I am motivated by my desire to understand the experiences of early Arab Americans, while at the same time I must also reckon with the fact that there is no one story that can represent Arab American history fully and completely. A scholar who studies history must necessarily engage with an archive. But what defines an archive? And what does it represent? At the center of my methodological investment is an insistence that the construction and narrative of archives cannot be taken for granted as *a priori* sources of historical knowledge. I understand archives as assemblages of texts that are grouped together in order to tell a particular narrative about the subject of the archive in relation to the nation and in the *interest* of the nation. The selection of materials (i.e., which materials are included in the archive, which materials are deemed relevant, etc.) and also the organization of the materials help to construct the archive’s narrative. To a certain extent, then, the archives that historians use—our sources—confine *and* produce the stories that we may tell as historians. Arab American studies historians have focused on three types of archival sites to produce knowledge about the early Syrian American community. First, government archives are an abundant

source for understanding how Arabs have been positioned within the United States narratives of citizenship. These archives, which include state-produced sources like immigration and naturalization documents, court cases, and census reports, represent the view of various state appendages and reveal the disciplinary logics of the state and its implications for the early Arab American community. Second, scholars have also relied upon what Juliana Hu Pegues calls “the [state] archive’s supporting documents,” documents produced by non-state actors which “[shape] the parameters of [the state’s] colonial and racial logics.”<sup>18</sup> Examples of these kinds of supporting documents used by Arab American studies scholars are anthropological explanatory works on Syrian immigrant communities in the United States and short stories and essays written by middle-class consumers in literary and popular magazines. A third archival source are the ethnic-nationalist archives that have been produced by Arab American community members themselves; scholars have benefited from the prolific issues of Arab American (and Arab diaspora) periodicals that were produced in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as several collections of Arab American-centric archival material which include oral histories with first and second generation Arab Americans. The point to this is not that some archives are better than others for historical scholarship, but rather those archival collections cannot be detached from the narratives they help to form. Archives, then, are not repositories of historical facts, and historical narratives are not the stories that illuminate those facts; rather, both are carefully constructed—and contested—sites of

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18. Juliana Hu Pegues, “Interrogating Intimacies: Asian American and Native Relations in Colonial Alaska” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2013), 20.

representation. This project, then, is as much an analysis and writing of history as it is a prolonged comment on Arab American representation.

Many scholars have shown the ways in which state archives only tell certain stories, namely the stories of those people and institutions that have “mattered” most in traditional history, and thereby obfuscate the histories of women, non-white people, the disabled, for example. My method draws on the responses to this kind of history—namely ethnic history, women’s history, postcolonial history, and histories of sexuality—that may look in places that dominant historiography doesn’t and that may narrate the stories of official archives in ways that lays bare the systems of dominance they contain. And yet, in the ways that any subject is made legible through the exclusion of other ways of being, these resistant histories are also predicated upon exclusions that often deny the intricacies of intersectionality; thus, women’s history may still end up implicitly telling *white* women’s history or Asian American history may tell *heterosexual* Asian American history. Rather than producing a history that attempts to correct these exclusions, my method accounts for absences, traces, and possibilities, and focuses on how power works through the creation of historical narratives. In order to achieve this, when I read archival material, I look for things that are “off,” for moments of hesitation, for things that appear strange. I look for the possibilities of ambiguity, excess, and multiple interpretations in the ways that Arab Americans were constituted and constituted themselves. In other words, I intentionally use my own affective responses to archive material to question the narrative that the archive has produced. I also ask how the language and form of archives produce the power of the narratives they contain. Specifically, what adjectives are used to

describe the archival population and what valuation is attached to those descriptors? What items in the archive are valued and what do they represent? What items are less valued and why? As a scholar, I too am in a position of power in relation to the archival material I interpret. Part of my method, then, is to make the voice of this intellectual narrative visible as *my* voice. The reader of this dissertation should thus always know who is claiming, producing, and questioning this knowledge, and to what ends.

The methods of historical analysis often entail a process of recuperation and excavation, particularly where the histories of those who have been systemically marginalized are concerned. Those who have been ostracized for sexual and gender non-conformity, racial difference and deviations from whiteness, poverty, disability, and non-normative bodies, for example, are not likely to appear in official historical archives, except as the result of policing or pathologizing forces. For social historians, a project of recovery presents itself as a powerful political tool, a source of pride, and a weapon against “invisibility.” For Arab Americans, a social history of early Arab America, or an “ethnic” history, can represent “we’ve been here, we survived, we existed and exist still” in the face of violent rhetoric and criminalization that denies our place in the United States and even in our ancestral homelands. Sometimes these histories can answer the claim that Arabs are essentially and oppositionally different from and incompatible with Americans; these histories can respond to this claim: “we were (are) just like you.” This is a dual outcome of all representation, one affirming and one assimilating, a dilemma of which history is not the exclusive proprietor. Emma Pérez traces this dual tendency as specific to ethnic history writing, in which documenting the existence and contributions

of minoritized communities builds armor against institutional oppression. At the same time the constant comparison of ethnic groups to the white majority prompts Pérez to ask, “Can we salvage history from sameness?”<sup>19</sup> This dilemma can be described as one of accepting historical invisibility (or pathology) versus crafting an assimilative and respectable narrative of presence. The dyad of this representational framework cannot be avoided. However, rather than accepting that this historical work will be one of sameness or of difference, I highlight instead the discursive and material parameters by which Syrian immigrants were constituted as similar to or different from native-born white Americans. Rather than creating a new, different, or resistant representation of Arab Americans in response to this dilemma, I focus on the function of the existing historical representations of the early Arab American community.

This project is rooted in interdisciplinary knowledge production, particularly interdisciplinary ways of thinking about power and oppression in “the past.” The majority of the scholarship that buttresses this research is rooted in women of color feminist theory, queer (and often queer-of-color) theory, and postcolonial studies. As I am primarily interested in historical narratives and power, but not disciplinarily-rooted in history, I frame my approach to Arab American history as a queer method, a strategy which allows me to embrace the messiness of interdisciplinary training. I employ “queer” in this sense, not as a particular subject that I am looking for—not as a noun—but rather as a lens for thinking about which practices and encounters may have threatened the

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19. Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Press, 2009), 20.

racial regimes of heteronormativity at a given moment.<sup>20</sup> As a reading practice, queer functions through hesitation, “through a caution to name or decide in advance what an archive of absences or a rhetorical entanglement will yield up...”<sup>21</sup> This queer method is not divorced from the sexual, however; on the contrary, it is open to desire, “always partial, only a potentiality, an opening onto other worlds yet to come.”<sup>22</sup> While not a subject itself, the queer in this method functions similarly to the queer subject. A history of possibility, of traces, and of absences is thus queer in its practice, even if its subjects are not “queer” themselves.

Anjali Arondekar’s research on sexuality in colonial India challenges historians to rethink the assumption of “invisibility” within the archive, particularly where sexual non-normativity concerned. Arondekar asserts, “Rather than render sexuality’s relationship to the colonial archive through the preferred lens of historical invisibility (which would presume that there is something about sexuality that is lost or silent and needs to ‘come out’), [I pursue] the questions of how sexuality is made visible in the colonial archive and of how this process paradoxically discloses the very limits of that visibility.”<sup>23</sup> As “marginality” is often in partnership with “invisibility,” Arondekar considers sexuality to

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20. I thank Juliana Hu Pegues for helping me to think about the differences between “queer” as a noun, verb, and adjective with regard to historical research practice.

21. Dina Al-Kassim, “Psychoanalysis and the Postcolonial Genealogy of Queer Theory,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, 2 (2013), 345.

22. Wilson Chacko Jacob, “The Middle East: Global, Postcolonial, Regional, and Queer,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, 2 (2013), 347.

23. Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

be “at the center” of the archive, rather than on the margins.<sup>24</sup> In a similar framework, Pérez takes the supposed invisibility of women in Chicano history as a present act: “Where women are conceptualized as merely a backdrop to men’s social and political activities, they are in fact intervening interstitially while sexing the colonial imaginary.”<sup>25</sup> While Arondekar and Pérez differ in the goals of their projects—Arondekar explicitly rejects looking for a sexual subject, while Pérez seeks to make Chicanas visible within historical narratives—I see their articulations of historiography as complementary conceptualizations of how to account for the traces, absences and possibilities archival research as both presences and acts. Thus, as I identify something that seems to be “missing” from archival material—for instance, the name of a wife or mother, details about the life of an unmarried family member—I can understand the absence of that information as the presence of normative regimes of gender and sexuality that were integral to early Arab American identity. I can thus “see” these regimes in the archive through the absences the archive has produced. Pérez’s and Arondekar’s work also calls me to confront my own desire to find non-normativity in the archive, particularly a non-normative *subject*, despite understanding how limiting that search would be. Rather than allowing this desire to determine my method, I find it fruitful for thinking about what is at stake in this work: the creation of knowledge and histories that sustain, nurture, and transform our communities in the face of all that is against us.

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24. Ibid,1.

25. Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 7.

## EARLY ARAB MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Arab migration to the United States has occurred in significant numbers during two major time periods: starting in the 1870s and curtailing with the 1924 National Origins Act, and from the close of World War II to the present. Syrians began arriving in the United States in the 1870s and continued arriving in small but steady numbers until further immigration restrictions were put in place in 1924. From that point through World War II, Syrians arrived in even smaller numbers due to quota restrictions. This first “wave” of migrants came from the Ottoman provinces of Syria, Mount Lebanon, and Palestine, and they were predominantly Christian, of multiple denominations. Post-World War II immigration has been more diverse in virtually every sense. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 marked a shift in Arab migration to the United States, as many Palestinians were displaced and sought refugee status elsewhere. This displacement intensified with the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Since World War II, migrants have come from all parts of West Asia, as well as North Africa; they have been more diverse in terms of socioeconomic class; they have been religiously more diverse with a greater percentage of Muslims; and, more than before, they have migrated due to the impacts of colonialism and war.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the conditions under which migrants from West Asia and North Africa immigrate (and the conditions in the United States they encounter) have intensified during this latter period of migration—especially since the U.S.-led “war on terror,” including the military operations in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Iraq. The analysis of these conditions and mobilizations against their most deleterious effects are

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26. Naber, “Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations,” 10.

the increasingly the subjects of pressing scholarship in Arab and Asian American studies, as well as scholarship in queer studies that examines the intersections between war, discourses of terrorism, and sexualized and racialized representations of Muslims.<sup>27</sup>

Of the pre-1948 migrants, most were from present day Lebanon and Syria (fewer were from Palestine) and the majority were also Christian (of Maronite, Melkite and Eastern Orthodox denominations). A small number were Druze, Muslim, and Jewish. The number of Syrians living in the United States throughout this period is unclear, and estimates range from 50,000 to as high as 200,000. This is due to the fact that they were initially recorded as coming from “Turkey in Asia” by immigration officials and were counted with all Ottoman subjects. Later, Syrian migrants were recorded separately under “Syrian,” but Syrians were often mis-identified as Turks, Assyrians, Greeks, or Armenians. Interestingly, Syrian migrants adopted the use of the term Syrian for themselves once this official U.S. classification changed.<sup>28</sup> Clearly then, naming was important from the beginning of this history.

While my research focuses primarily on the Arab migrant community within the

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27. Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, “Meeting Arab/Asian American Studies,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9,2 (2006), 118-140; Nadine Naber, “So Our History Doesn’t Become Your Future: The Local and Global Politics of Coalition Building Post September 11th,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 5,3 (2002), 217-242; Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007); Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 20,3 72 (2002),117-148.

28. Lisa Suheir Majaj, “Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race,” *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, eds. Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 321.

boundaries of the United States, it is important to understand that this migration took place in the context of various types of migration. First, a history of internal migration within the Ottoman Empire predated transatlantic migration.<sup>29</sup> Ottoman subjects, including but not limited to Syrians, migrated for seasonal labor, for upward career moves to urban centers, and as a result of war and conflict. War also contributed to an influx of refugees into Syria from outside the Ottoman Empire: as a result of the Russian-Ottoman Wars of 1853-56 and 1877-78, over one million Muslims from the Caucasus left the region as refugees. Tens of thousands died during the process of their resettlement and those that survived eventually settled in Bulgaria and Syria.<sup>30</sup> The Syrian ‘international’ migration that began toward the end of the nineteenth century was largely the result of a changing global economy and its effects on the local silk industry.<sup>31</sup> This migration included significant numbers of Syrians who resettled and moved through Central and South America, greatly surpassing the number of Syrian migrants in the United States. Importantly, the routes of peddlers were also not confined to the United States, particularly for those peddling near the more porous U.S.-Canadian border.<sup>32</sup>

#### ARAB AMERICANS AND RACE

Race in the early Arab American community cannot be understood without a

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29. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 24-29.

30. Ibid, 28.

31. Ibid, 29.

32. Naff, *Becoming American*, 150-51.

broader temporal context of how Arab Americans have been implicated in U.S. systems of white supremacy. Contemporary understandings of the racialization of Arabs, Muslims, and those perceived to be such are overwhelmingly linked to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the subsequent “War on Terror.” This narrative posits that, because of the Arab and Muslim identities of the 9/11 hijackers, all Arabs and Muslims have been profiled and stereotyped as terrorists. This invokes the idea that Arabs appeared suddenly on the US racial landscape in 2001. Arab American studies scholars are quick to point out that, while 9/11 and the “War on Terror” have sharply intensified these stereotypes, they did not, in fact, originate with the events of 2001. Scholars like Nadine Naber, Evelyn Alsultany, and Helen Samhan point to events like the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the 1979 Iran hostage crisis, as well as the prevalence of stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims in the US media and the repression of Arab American political activism regarding Palestine. In doing so, these scholars gesture toward a longer history of Orientalism that has animated the figure of the Arab, Muslim, and eventual Islamic Terrorist in the national American imaginary.

Arab Americans have been described as occupying two racial extremes: invisibility and hypervisibility. The state of invisibility is often attributed to the early Arab American community, in which those Arabs are understood to have fully assimilated and become white, no longer being seen (or identifying) as Arab American. The framework of invisibility has also been used, however, to describe the place of Arab Americans within people of color politics post-1967, when Arab American activism regarding Palestine, and state repression against Arab American activists, surged. In his

groundbreaking anthology on Arab American and Arab Canadian feminist writings, Joe Kadi calls Arabs in North America “the most invisible of the invisibles.”<sup>33</sup> Kadi and others contend that although Arabs have been subjected to racism, other people of color do not recognize them as such, do not realize Arabs exist in the United States and Canada, or are ignorant of how white supremacy affects Arab communities.<sup>34</sup> Given these wide divergences—between the invisibility of whiteness and the invisibility within people-of-color politics—the trope of “invisibility” does not adequately explain Arab American racial positions. Nadine Naber addresses this complexity that exceeds the bounds of the invisibility trope by showing how Arab American racialization is structured by paradoxes and ambiguity.<sup>35</sup> Naber identifies four paradoxes in Arab American racialization: 1) Arabs are portrayed as a homogeneous group, despite the different ethnic, national, religious, and linguistic identities among them; 2) Arab Americans are racialized as both white and non-white (all Arab Americans are officially classified as “Caucasian” by the federal government, some Arab Americans “pass” as white and benefit from white privilege, and some Arab Americans are racialized as non-white in their everyday lives); 3) Arab Americans are racialized via religion (i.e. the perception that all Arabs are Muslim), rather than by phenotype alone; and 4) race and religion as

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33. Joe Kadi, *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), xix.

34. Ibid, xix-xx.; Nada Elia, “The ‘White’ Sheep of the Family: But *Bleaching* is Like Starvation,” *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 223-31.

35. Nadine Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 1 (2000), 37-61.

categories of difference overlap for Arab Americans, blending the U.S. and Arab world's primary axes of difference.<sup>36</sup> A focus on the early Syrian American community exemplifies some of these paradoxes. Syrian Americans were legally classified as white in 1915 (as addressed below) but experienced non-white racialization as well. The Syrian American community was also largely Christian, but it was perceived through a racialized lens of belonging to a "Muslim culture," even when Syrian Christians were correctly identified as such.

The public voices of Arab American communities—scholars, artists, and activists—have attempted to increase the visibility of their community's presence, history, and injustices. Simultaneously, racist perceptions of Arabs became more prevalent as U.S. interests in West Asia and North Africa grew, namely through the United States' economic and military alliance with Israel, its dependence upon the region's oil resources, and its first war on Iraq. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, "invisibility" is firmly understood as a racial paradigm of the past for Arab Americans. Now, rather than simply being "visible," Arab Americans have become "hypervisible" and ever-present in the white supremacist and imperialist imaginary of the United States, configured always and only as terrorists or potential terrorists. There has also been increased awareness of anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia within other communities of color. For instance, a Bay-area Japanese American organization, called "Nosei," immediately showed solidarity with those profiled as Arabs and/or Muslims after September 11th, by emphasizing the links between Japanese American internment and

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36. Ibid.

the post-9/11 backlash.<sup>37</sup> The other result of this increased awareness and visibility of anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, however, has been tokenism within the white-led non-profit industrial complex. Non-profit programming with the “targeted” communities became critically linked to funding sources, making Arabs, South Asians, and Muslims both a trend and a financial resource. But these programs were focused within the liberal multicultural framework of “diversity” rather than emphasizing racial justice,<sup>38</sup> thus not producing systemic change for these communities. More than a decade into the U.S.-led “war on terror,” Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism have permeated U.S. culture and show no sign of abatement. More and more Arab American studies scholars are thinking critically about the usefulness, limits, and accuracy of “race” as a framework for the Arab American experience.<sup>39</sup>

The ontological confusion surrounding West Asian immigrants at the turn of the century—in which the labels of Syrian, Assyrian, Turk, Persian, Armenian, and sometimes Greek were used interchangeably—have resurfaced, if only slightly rearranged, in the contemporary amalgamation of Arab/Muslim/South Asian/Middle Eastern.<sup>40</sup> If we add to this the fact that “Mohammedan” was also sometimes used to describe the older generation of immigrants, even when those immigrants were not

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37. Naber, "So Our History Doesn't Become Your Future", 226.

38. Ibid, 230-31.

39. A primary example of this is the anthology *Arab Americans and Race Before and After 9/11*, edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber.

40. One attempt at shortening the name for this phenomenon is “AMEMSA”: “Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, South Asian.”

Muslim, then a clear connective thread between the two groupings emerges: the racialization of Islam. A second and interrelated connective thread is the nebulous geographic entity of “the Middle East.” Although predating the common usage of that term, the earlier generation of West Asian immigrants all came from the areas that would come to be known as the Middle East from the Cold War era onward. In the contemporary situation, the Bush administration coined the term “the Greater Middle East” in 2004, which included Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as North Africa. This grouping was an obvious attempt to consider most countries with majority-Muslim populations as part of the region that Americans already associated with Islam. While the racialization of Islam in U.S. contexts is often traced to histories of American militarism and intervention in West Asia since the Cold War, we can also look to this early period of largely Christian Arab travel through and settlement within the United States to understand the tethering (however tenuous) of race to religion for Arab Americans.

Both scholarly and popular conceptions of Arab and Muslim racial difference depend upon a general acceptance of the invisibility (as whiteness) of Arab Americans before 1967. In a popular sense, invisibility reigns, as there is an overwhelming ignorance of the presence of Arabs and Muslims in U.S. society long before 9/11. In academic circles, the acceptance of the whiteness and assimilation of early Arab immigrants recalls the history of race in citizenship and naturalization law in the early twentieth century. The origins of the racial classification paradox can be better understood through the “racial prerequisite cases” of the first half of the twentieth century, in which racialized discourses of religion also played a major role. Ian Haney Lopez’s groundbreaking work

on these cases details how the boundaries of whiteness were policed and expanded to reinforce the exclusion of Asian immigrants from claiming U.S. citizenship. This scholarship provides a foundation for understanding how concepts of race were cemented and contorted during the period of massive immigration to the United States. In addition, the entanglements of Syrians with racial discourse at this time accumulated from the history of U.S. and European ideas about Islam, Asia, and ‘civilization’ through orientalist ideas.<sup>41</sup> The racial prerequisite cases consisted of petitions for naturalization on behalf of various groups of non-European immigrants. According to the statute from 1870, naturalization was afforded to “free white persons” or those with “African nativity or African descent,” the latter clause having been added after the Civil War and emancipation of African-descended people living under slavery. Only one person petitioned for naturalization on the basis of African ancestry during the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> The rest of the cases, therefore, involved non-Europeans (including West Asians, South Asians, Chinese and Japanese) petitioning for naturalization through explicit claims to whiteness. Although petitioners from each group were ruled at various points to be eligible or ineligible for naturalization, the final rulings were a crucial divergence in the racializations of each group. Ending with the Supreme Court decision *Dow v. United States* in 1915, Syrians, along with other West Asians, were one of the few

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41. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 2-3. Edward Said defines orientalism as both “a style of thought” and “the corporate institution” of “dealing” with the Orient “based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’”

42. *In re Cruz* 23 F. Supp. 774 (E.D.N.Y. 1938)

groups of petitioners to be granted naturalization rights and to have those rulings upheld in appellate courts. Thus, Syrians were ruled legally white. Due to not only the varying outcomes of the Syrian naturalization cases throughout this period, but also the often contradictory reasoning judges had for those decisions, Syrians have been called “the courts’ ultimate poltergeist.”<sup>43</sup>

Sarah Gualtieri has shown how claims to whiteness on behalf of the Syrian community in these cases moved from initially being couched in terms of civilizational and religious likeness to Europeans, to being also explicitly about claiming a white identity that meant “not black” and “not Asian.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in the case that was ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court in the Syrians’ favor, their argument linked Christianity to ethnological classifications of race and whiteness as central to Syrian identity. The successful Syrian argument for whiteness had five claims: 1) that Syrians were “Caucasian” and thus “white”; 2) that Syrians were members of the “Semitic nations”; 3) that the “Semitic nations” are all part of the “‘Caucasian’ or white race”; 4) that European Jews have been naturalized without question, as they are Semites, and so should it be for Syrians; and 5) that Syrians have a strong historical connection to Jewish and Christian peoples and thus the original statute did not intend to exclude them.<sup>45</sup> Richard Dyer has outlined that the discursive use of Christianity is one of three major ways in which

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43. Furumoto and Goldberg, “Boundaries of the Racial State,” 85.

44. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 53, 69.

45. Ibid. For more in-depth discussion of this argument for Syrian whiteness, see Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 66-70.

whiteness is represented in Western societies.<sup>46</sup> This is echoed in the claims of Syrian Christians to whiteness through their proximity to Christianity (both in terms of religious identifications and historical geography). But the specific nature of how this Christianity is *embodied*, for whiteness in particular and race in general, leads to a clearer picture of the intersectional constitution of racialization. First, Dyer claims that the figures of Christ and Mary become the ideals of manhood and womanhood that one must strive for but can never attain: women as passive, receptive, mothers; men who struggle between mind and body, with suffering as a sign of physical and spiritual “striving.”<sup>47</sup> And second, Dyer succinctly articulates how race is a concept of sexual embodiment:

All concepts of race are always concepts of the body and also of heterosexuality. Race is a means of categorising different types of human bodies which reproduce themselves. It seeks to systematise differences and to relate them to differences of character and worth. Heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of endangering, the reproduction of these differences.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the processes of making whiteness and of assimilation demand normativity in other aspects of self (i.e. gender, sexuality, class, able bodies). This was the case both in how elite Christian Syrians articulated whiteness and when they distanced themselves from their Muslim counterparts.<sup>49</sup>

The interweaving between Ashkenazi and Syrian Christian processes of racialization in the United States is also evident here. European Jews, as with other

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46. Dyer, Richard, *White* (Routledge: London, 1997), 12.

47. *Ibid*, 15-16.

48. *Ibid*, 20.

49. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 145-146. Gualtieri’s work also shows evidence of anti-Muslim sentiment within the Christian Syrian American press, where the mistreatment of women was linked explicitly with Muslims and the practice of polygamy.

European petitioners, were granted naturalization rights without those petitions going to the courts. Successful Syrian petitioners thus used these links of proximity to Ashkenazim (ethnological, religious, historical-geographic, etc.) in order to build a case for whiteness. It would be illuminating to know where Syrian Jews fell in this grid of racial testing—were they counted as “Hebrews”, as European Jews were often labeled, and thus given naturalization rights without question? Was their geographic origin in Asia enough to include them with their co-nationals? Unfortunately, none of these naturalization cases concerned a Syrian Jewish petitioner.<sup>50</sup> As demonstrated in the epigraph, some instances of anti-Syrian racialization depended heavily on anti-Jewish (more specifically, anti-Ashkenazi) tropes as well. This will be addressed in chapter two.

Despite the legal victory for Syrian whiteness, Gualtieri’s research demonstrates how that whiteness remained “provisional, subject to scrutiny” long after.<sup>51</sup> Gualtieri borrows an earlier term coined by David Roediger and James Barrett, arguing that this provisionality of whiteness is more accurately characterized as a racial “inbetweenness”. This inbetweenness is evident in examples like the life of Dr. Shadid, which show how Arab Americans could be subject to racialized violence as well as a “whitened” access to wealth and privilege. Even given the difficulties in theorizing Arab American racialization, it remains clear that Arab Americans have been subjected to white

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50. Ibid, 68. This line of inquiry could also be followed through extra-legal routes. In the immigration scholarship I’ve read, I consistently see that Syrian Jews (Mizrahim) are studied with Ashkenazim in pan-Jewish work and are separated from Syrian Christians and Muslims. Conversely, many studies that focus on the Syrian immigrant population give little attention to the Syrian Jewish community.

51. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 130.

supremacy's violent and disciplining power, whether it be through assimilation, non-white racialization, or some combination of both. Arab Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were definitely understood and othered through Orientalist tropes. At times, the difference created by these tropes was explicitly racial and in other instances the raciality was implicit. However, Asian Americans, specifically those of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean descent, were the primary objects of Orientalist justification for U.S. imperialism, starting with the anti-Asian immigration laws targeting the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and South Asian migrants, through the internment of Japanese Americans and war with Japan during World War II, and through the Korean War in the early 1950s. Early Arab Americans were at times the target of Orientalism/war, but they also participated in the logics of anti-black racism, settler colonialism, and Orientalism toward other Asians.<sup>52</sup>

## GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN ARAB AMERICA

Arab Americans are racialized through orientalist concepts of "culture," which cast Arabs as the opposite of Americans and American culture.<sup>53</sup> Specifically, Arab culture is cast as uncivilized or "backwards." The racialization that occurs hinges specifically upon ideas about gender and sexuality. In our current moment, the

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52. Andrea Smith, "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy," *Racial Formation in the Twenty First Century*, Eds. Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 66-90.

53. Nadine Naber, "Decolonizing Culture: Beyond Orientalist and Anti-Orientalist Feminisms" *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, Eds. Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012 [2010]), 158-65.

“backwardness” of Arab culture is articulated through narrating the oppression of Arab women, queers, and transgender people as endemic to “the Arab world” and as a particular feature of Islam. Through this orientalist lens, Arab sexuality is repressed and oppressive. Before the Cold War, however, this backwardness was articulated differently. Namely, Arab and Muslim societies were seen by Europeans and Americans as deprived and licentious, and still oppressive to women.<sup>54</sup> Remaining constant in both of these orientalist stories is the representation of North American and/Europe as “free” in contrast to the “unfree” Middle East.

Sexuality and gender thus are always already foregrounded in representations of Arabs, particularly Arab women, whether it be through the sexually available belly dancer or the confined veiled woman. The idea of the harem looms in both representations, as an “imaginative space through which to project masculinist and heteronormative fantasies of erotic desire and male power, as organized around male access to and possession of women.”<sup>55</sup> The Euro-American fantasy of the Orient as a sexual paradise for white men thus continues to reverberate, even amidst contemporary representations of “the Middle East” as sexually repressed and repressive. The echoes of earlier representations today function as “nostalgic foils for U.S. progress and as imaginative figures through which to grapple with shifting power relations between the

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54. Rabab Abdulhadi, “Sexualities and the Social Order in Arab and Muslim Communities,” *Islam and Homosexuality*, Ed. Samar Habib (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 470.

55. Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 3.

United States and the Middle East.”<sup>56</sup>

For Arabs and Arab Americans, gender and sexuality emerged as sites of containing and representing culture, in opposition to orientalist scripts. This “anti-orientalist” response reifies the gender essentialism of orientalism, flipped on its head, by asserting that Arab women are “good” (sexually chaste, family-oriented, and moral) and American women are “bad” (sexually promiscuous, from broken families, and immoral).<sup>57</sup> As a result, many Arab American feminists have been wary of reproducing these stereotypes in any criticism of heteropatriarchy in Arab (American) communities.<sup>58</sup> Arab American studies encounters the same difficulty, despite the rich tradition of Arab and Arab diasporic feminist thought. The response within Arab American studies has often been to acknowledge and include the many contributions of Arab American women, but without centering an analysis of heterosexism, or to ignore gender and sexuality as issues of power altogether. The rejection or elision of sexuality in response to these stereotypes is either heteronormative and thus not a rejection at all, irresponsible historical revisionism, or both simultaneously.

In this dissertation, this context of past and contemporary uses and abuses of Arab gender and sexuality remains at stake in creating and critiquing Arab American history. My response to this is to emphasize the complexity of Arab American experiences, while

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56. Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood*, 7.

57. Naber, “Decolonizing Culture.”

58. Amira Jarmakani, “Arab American Feminisms: Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility,” *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 227-41. Jarmakani’s essay in this volume details a different approach toward working through this predicament.

acknowledging how power structured, limited, and enabled their lives through gender and sexuality. I thus aim to think about “Arabness” differently through this history, attempting what Nadine Naber calls “decolonizing Arabness.”<sup>59</sup>

The early Arab American community left behind a full and documented legacy with which to understand their history. The Syrian American press was prolific, with 102 periodicals by 1929.<sup>60</sup> There was a vibrant Syrian American intelligentsia, the “Pen League” or *Al Rabita al Qalamiyya*, which included the likes of Ameen Rihani, Khalil Gibran, and Elia Abu Madi. The papers of prominent Syrian American families and scholars have been deposited in several different Arab American archival collections. The assimilation of these Arab Americans into many aspects of white American culture—through their professions, their marriages and families, and through the very process of narrating their family history as immigrant assimilation stories—is well documented within this legacy. And yet the experiences of poor Syrian migrants are often pushed to the background of Arab American history, despite the fact that most in the early Arab American community came from peasant families. How then do we understand non-elite Syrian immigrants whose lives did not resemble the trajectory of economic upward mobility that is a common narrative about this early wave of Arab immigration? And what do these experiences tell us about the role of class and work in constructing Syrian

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59. Naber, “Decolonizing Culture,” 164.

60. Beverlee Turner Mehdi, ed. *The Arabs in America 1492-1977* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1978), 17.

whiteness?

The archives that I use in this dissertation have been chosen for two primary reasons: they enable me to critically analyze the figure of the Syrian peddler and the economic network and practices that supported peddling, and they allow me to center discussions of power and method in the construction of Arab American history. When I began this project, I started from a place of inquiry into Arab American history and race, and I was interested specifically in the *anxieties* that circulated about Arab peddlers. I went first to ethnic archives of the Arab American community. In my admitted, yet productive naiveté, I thought, where else would one find materials pertaining to a particular ethnic group but in an ethnically-organized collection? These collections communicate the dominant stories that this earlier Arab American community desires to tell of itself. The stories are pedagogical tools in the values of Arab American adaptation to normative American exigencies. The epigraph to this introduction, a complex smear-tactic against a would-be Arab American politician, was what first drew me into thinking about the Arab American peddler as a gendered, sexualized, and racialized figure that provoked anxiety. But in the end, Arab American collections were not a prolific or particularly compelling site for the finding of these anxieties.<sup>61</sup> What was compelling in these spaces was the unsaid, or the negative image/text left by the dominant representations created. I explore these themes in chapters one and four. As a result of

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61. More attention is needed toward Alixa Naff's oral histories. Both Naff's questions and guidance of the interviews, and the framing of interviewees, suggest a tendency to fit peddling into the dominant stories produced by Arab American history. But I have not yet had the resources to focus on these interviews.

these experiences with Arab American collections, I looked more broadly for appearances of the Syrian peddler; I found a proliferation of Syrian peddlers in cultural material, primarily children's books and short stories, and in social welfare periodicals. The social welfare archives I use in chapter three turned out to be an abundant and largely ignored source of knowledge production about the working class and gender in the early Syrian American community.

Chapter one, "Narrating Arab American History: The Peddling Thesis," explores the figure of the peddler and peddling practices within the Arab American academic archive. I place this project in conversation with Arab American studies scholars who have yet to reckon with the exclusions produced in narratives concerning the early period of Arab American history. I focus on how the work and economies of peddling are employed in Arab American historical scholarship in order to reveal how gender and sexual normativity are used implicitly in these narratives to construct a naturalization of Syrian whiteness through economic upward mobility. I contend that assumptions of heterosexuality and gender normativity and the relationship between Christianity and whiteness are central to these stories. I also show how the particular narrative surrounding the peddling thesis has accumulated such power via citational practices. I then argue for an Arab American historical practice that centers upon the possible rather than the conclusive, as a way to avoid exclusionary knowledge production about the early Arab American community that often relegates women, gender non-conforming people, sexual outsiders, and working class/working poor people to the margins of history. To do this, I demonstrate two different ways of writing about one individual from this history

and show how centering the possible, rather than the conclusive, allows for an anti-essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality in Arab American history.

In chapters two and three I explore the reasons behind the careful creation and management of the peddling narrative by the early Arab American community, through understanding the ideas that marred peddlers and peddling practices. Chapter two, “Peddlers, ‘Persians,’ and Roving Sexual Threats,” outlines the pathologization of the *figure* of the Syrian peddler, as seen through a cultural-nationalist archive.

Representations of Syrian male peddlers were abundant in popular culture. Rather than showing a broad array of representations, I focus on a representation that continues to reverberate decades after its debut and which holds a significant place in the cultural imaginary of the United States: the musical *Oklahoma!* and its peddler character Ali Hakim. The use of orientalism in defining the gender and sexual difference of peddlers, as portrayed in *Oklahoma!*, reveals the anxieties Syrian peddlers evoked about white racial purity, masculinity, and sexual normalcy. The labor of peddlers in rural spaces also made them facilitators of settler colonialism, and thus a necessity for the U.S. settler colonial state. Ali Hakim’s character demonstrates how peddlers could be forced to assimilate, through the cessation of movement and marriage to a white settler.

Chapter three, “‘From Peddling it is Only a Step to Begging’: Syrian Immigrants and Social Welfare,” centers on social work discourses regarding Syrian women peddlers, Syrian motherhood, and the Syrian immigrant home and shows how the *economy* of Syrian peddling was pathologized. I read the social welfare archive for the associations between transience, sexual/gender deviance and Orientalist tropes of

difference in order to consider how Syrian women were racialized through their participation in peddling economies. This analysis shows how the peddling of Syrian women was directly at odds with notions of white, middle class femininity and thus a threat to Syrian community claims of whiteness. This historical site provides not only an example of the tethering of gender, sexuality, and class to race in early Arab America, but also insight into how the choices that Arab migrant women made regarding their labor had lasting implications for their communities.

Chapter four, “Erotics and Intimacies: Imaging and Imagining Pleasure in Early Arab America,” puts into practice the methodological critique that I develop in the rest of the dissertation. Using the ethnic-nationalist Arab American archive, this chapter asks what historical traces remain of sexual and gender “deviance” in Syrian peddler communities when most archival materials have been assembled to present a respectable and assimilable image of Arab immigrants. I examine a series of photographs of peddlers and their family members that demonstrate the connections of intimacy, homosociality, erotics, and work within these communities. I use post-colonial historical frameworks, particularly Emma Pérez’s concept of the “decolonial imaginary” in order to imagine the queer possibilities of Arab American history.

While Arab American studies scholarship is growing, and while discussions of race within that scholarship form a crucial component, much of this scholarship analyzes racialization in isolation from structures of dominance. The histories of Arabs and Arab American subjectivities remain marginalized and tokenized within women’s and gender studies and sexuality studies. Additionally, intersectional work on the early period of

Arab migration is sparse. Thus, this dissertation is at the nexus of multiple fields of study, putting Arab American studies, queer studies, women's studies, and postcolonial history in conversation with each other.

I started to delve into Arab American history with swathes of stories from my own family's history, rumors of "deviant" sexualities, and jokes that were told about long lost relatives in the Deep South, through laughter imbued with partial belief. I found myself chasing down the "facts" in order to give context to what at times I'm searching for and at others I'm trying to trace. Is there an official beginning and end to the first "wave" of Arab immigration to the United States? What to make of the fact that different scholars use different dates? What were the borders of "Greater Syria" at the time of this migration? Some sources list modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Palestine/Israel and Jordan—while others also include southern Turkey and the nefarious "parts of" Iraq and Iran. The "Asiatic Barred Zone" that, in 1917, defined borders of Asia for immigration exclusion did not include the entirety of Asia's western borders—but contemporary scholars disagree on what the borders of that zone included. In multiple places, I have read that Syrians were the only group of non-Europeans to receive naturalization rights in the early twentieth century; and in other places, Turks, Persians, and Armenians are also listed. Inconsistencies and contradictions abound as I reread texts to make sure that it is not just my mind playing tricks on me. I mention these difficulties not to admit to my own incompetence or to point out the faults of others. Rather, I would argue that these slippages of historical "facts" represent the logical outcome of academic disciplines that have not known how to accommodate that which resists being "known." These

inconsistencies and contradictions—*this* is the history of Arab American racialization, a history too multiple, too shifting, too uncertain to lend itself to a complete mapping. And this project is an attempt to revel in the possibilities of that incompleteness.

## Chapter 1

### Narrating Arab American History: The Peddling Thesis

Socially, the deep satisfaction with America which accompanied their peddling success redirected their goals from those of temporary migrants to permanent citizens. In their trade, the unavoidable contacts with American society broke down resistance to learning by interacting with and imitating many aspects of American life. Any barrier that Syrian leaders would later erect against the tide of Americanization would be built on the quicksands of the peddling experience.  
—Alix Naff, *Becoming American*<sup>62</sup>

The narrative of the Syrian pack-peddler is so central to the way in which the pioneer generation has been historicized that no scholarly account of the years between 1880 and 1924 exists in which the figure does not appear prominently.  
—Jacob Rama Berman, *American Arabesque*<sup>63</sup>

I begin this journey into Arab American history through a prominent and important historical narrative that circulates about the early Arab American community and peddling practices. That narrative was crafted by the late historian Alix Naff, daughter of Syrian immigrants and a woman who dedicated her life to the preservation of the stories from this early community. Naff's book, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, illuminates the centrality of peddling practices in the early Arab American community. The narrative both reveals the values that this early community held, as well as illuminates the how the articulation of peddling practices could be managed in a way that emphasized the respectability of the community. Rather than beginning with the history itself, understanding the dominant narrative that frames this history and the

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62. Naff, *Becoming American*, 199.

63. Jacob Rama Berman, *American Arabesque: Arabs, Islam, and the Nineteenth Century Imaginary* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 180.

values it contains will allow me to carry out my historical analysis while also keeping in mind how this historical narrative functions in the present.

Narrating the history of a marginalized community is an act laden with fraught choices, difficult exclusions, and balancing the need for accuracy with the desire to tell a “good” story. For immigrant communities and communities of color in the United States, these histories are often told through a lens of respectability, a narrative move which more easily accommodates the tropes of immigrant successes and picking oneself up by the “bootstraps.” This narrative simultaneously demonstrates the so-called American qualities of the community. The tethering of “white” to “American” is integral to this narrative strategy, in which those ideals of what it means to be American are implicitly white American ideals. And as demonstrated in this research, the ideals of whiteness do not stand isolated from norms of economic standing or the sexual and gendered body; respectability is explicitly linked to women and sexuality.<sup>64</sup> The Arab American case has been no exception, where most historical scholarship concerning the early wave of Syrian migrants in the United States has detailed a process of swift assimilation and Americanization. In particular, the first two decades in the twentieth century, during which time Syrians struggled to be legally considered white in naturalization cases, is frequently described as a blip on an otherwise smooth road to social integration and economic success. For instance, some historians have framed Syrians’ imbrication in this debate as a matter of “mistaken identity,” wherein Syrians were mis-identified as non-

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64. E. Francis White. *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

white and specifically Asian. The arguments used to oppose Syrians' non-white status, as detailed in the introduction, distanced Syrians from others of the Asian continent through emphasizing their homeland's geographic proximity to Europe and site of the birthplace of Christianity.

This chapter considers the narratives that have been produced in Arab American history about this period and examines what these narratives tell us about the racial constitution of early Arab Americans. In particular, the figure of the peddler and the economic network of peddling emerge as central features of the Arab American immigrant "success story," and ideologies interweaving class, gender, and sexuality undergird this story. Although historians have focused more on peddling in early Arab American communities than on other forms of labor, Syrians working textile mills were actually more numerous throughout the first wave of migration, particularly for younger, unmarried women and girls in the northeastern United States.<sup>65</sup> Despite this statistical evidence, pack peddling has had a central place in Arab American historical narratives as being the key to the early Syrian immigrants' integration into U.S. society.<sup>66</sup> Peddling is the foundation of such a claim because it enabled the dispersal of Syrians beyond urban enclaves (i.e. "Syrian colonies"), it was a relatively quick and at times easy way to earn

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65. Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997); Matthew Jaber Stiffler, "A Brief History of Arab Immigrant Textile Production in the U.S." (Arab American National Museum, 2010).

66. Stiffler, "A Brief History," 2.

money, and it allowed for contact between Syrians and other U.S. residents.<sup>67</sup> The epigraph to this chapter exemplifies the relationship that has been articulated between peddling and Syrian assimilation.<sup>68</sup> While neither race, sexuality, nor gender are explicit in the description of the cultural “quicksands of the peddling experience,” the categories of migrant versus citizen and Syrian versus American are absolutely dependent upon the racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities of whiteness. The epigraph also suggests that Syrians were initially “resistant” to “learning” American cultural norms, implying that any resistance to assimilation was based in a stubborn ignorance. Once the beginning of the assimilation process is marked by peddling, however, Syrians are characterized as having embraced assimilation. Where class is concerned, one recurring narration in Arab American history emphasizes Syrians’ entrepreneurial nature and adaptability in peddling work—peddling was seen as a temporary profession of survival that showcased Syrians’ “natural” propensity for entrepreneurship and commitment to capitalism. In this narrative, peddling was viewed as a stepping-stone to more “settled” business practices and personal life—all things that were part and parcel of assimilating into and claiming Americanness. But these and other perceptions of peddlers were also a locus of anxiety about Syrians’ deviance from white, middle class, American norms of gender and

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67. Naff, *Becoming American*.

68. By “assimilation”, I mean the process by which Syrians ceased to identify themselves as Syrians/Lebanese/Arabs *and* different in some way from “Americans”, as well as the disappearance of markers that allowed others to identify them as Syrian/Lebanese/Arab and different from “Americans.” Examples could include the cessation of communicating in Arabic, the Anglicization of Arab names, and the “whitening” of Arab phenotypes (varied as they may be) through reproduction with Americans of European descent.

sexuality and non-Syrians often invoked Orientalist stereotypes of “Asians” in giving voice to that anxiety. The presence of Arab peddlers in the United States at the turn of the century, and the subjectivities they produced as immigrant laborers transgressing American social norms, were a disruption to the idea of a free and democratic “America” that contrasted itself to a barbaric and uncivilized “east.”<sup>69</sup> Thus, the recuperative narratives that Arab American historians have employed about the early Syrian community can be viewed as a direct response to the circulations of Arab sexual and gender deviance through Orientalist images of the peddler. Scholars who have studied these early Arab American communities noticed the uniqueness of the relationship of peddling to Syrian immigrant communities and sought to highlight those significances in ways that uplifted the reputation of the community.

The first section of this chapter will examine how peddling has been narrated in scholarship on Arab American history, detailing the ramifications of both the particular thesis that has been advanced and the ideological baggage regarding class, labor, gender, and sexuality that has accompanied the circulation of this thesis. Because of its wide circulation among subsequent Arab American studies scholars, I focus specifically on Alixa Naff’s thesis that peddling was the key to assimilation of the early Arab immigrant community, as advanced in *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*. I group the discussion of ideology within Naff’s work into three subsections: class,

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69. Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 6. I make this claim based on Emma Pérez’s observation that Chicano/as and Native Americans in the Southwest challenged histories of the Southwest through the subjectivities they produced.

capitalism, and individualism; periodization and progress; and gender, sexuality, and citizenship. It is important to note that my focus on Naff is not in order to criticize her choices as a historian; in fact, it is not about her as an individual at all. I chose to focus on Naff's work, because, after her publication, peddling has been seen as something that has been "done" in Arab American studies. In one sense, this is a testament to Naff's thorough inquiry and dedication to historical work on this early community. In another sense, however, the "doneness" of peddling is more an indication of how Arab American studies views historical work: as a work of documentation, not theory or critique. This assumption about historical work, coupled with the magnitude of Naff's research, has enabled her thesis to circulate with prominence.<sup>70</sup>

The second section of this chapter begins with a discussion of the function of power within writing history, as it relates specifically to normativity and racial difference and using narrative in particular. I show how the particular narrative surrounding the peddling thesis has accumulated such power via citational practices. I then argue for an Arab American historical practice that centers upon the possible rather than the conclusive, as a way to avoid exclusionary knowledge production about the early Arab American community that often relegates women, gender non-conforming people, sexual outsiders, and working class/working poor people to the margins of history.<sup>71</sup> To do this,

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70. Naff's thesis has not been without critique. See Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White* in particular.

71. Naff, *Becoming American*; Shakir, *Bint Arab*. It is important to note the significant contributions of both Alixa Naff and Evelyn Shakir in writing women into the histories of the early Arab American community. However, these important scholarly

I demonstrate two different ways of writing about one individual from this history and show how centering the possible, rather than the conclusive, allows for an anti-essentialist understanding of gender and sexuality in Arab American history.

In this chapter, I focus on how the work and economies of peddling are employed in Arab American historical scholarship in order to reveal how gender and sexual normativity are used implicitly in these narratives to construct a naturalization of Syrian whiteness through economic upward mobility. In this narrative, Syrians are not “becoming” white as they are becoming American, but rather, the story of their ascent in class is employed as retroactive proof of their pre-existing whiteness. In framing peddling as an example of the entrepreneurial and individualistic nature of Syrians, historians have taken what was a socially unstable practice in Arab American history and repackaged it to fit the ideals of U.S. citizenship: individualistic, entrepreneurial, and capitalist. Additionally, because the major peddling period for Syrian migrants coincided with Asian immigrant struggles to naturalize as U.S. citizens, the discussions around the merits or demerits of peddling took place in a larger context of debates about race, whiteness, and assimilation. Labor was essential to these discussions of race, as Asian immigrants were positioned as “unfree” through the figure of the Chinese “coolie,” regardless of their actual employment.<sup>72</sup>

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contributions are still predicated upon the compulsory heterosexuality of Arab (American) women and girls.

72. Moon-Ho Jung, “Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire, in the Age of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 57, 3 (2005), 677-701; Lisa Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” *Haunted By Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North*

Before delving into the construction of the peddling thesis, it is important to contextualize the moment in which Naff was writing, particularly in terms of how race was understood in the United States and in U.S. scholarship. Scholars of U.S. immigration history often cite two major origins of their field: the Chicago School of Sociology and what Jon Gjerde termed the “ethnic Turnerians”—those scholars influenced by Frederic Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis that centered European immigrants in the making of U.S. democracy. Whereas the Chicago sociologists were primarily concerned with immigrants in urban environments and the capability of cities to “modernize” and assimilate immigrant populations, ethnic Turnerians concerned themselves more with immigrants in rural communities and on the “frontier” of U.S. settler colonialism. While Chicago sociologists approached their scholarship as an uncritical response to the positioning of immigrants as a “problem,” the ethnic Turnerians, many of whom were the children of immigrants themselves, advanced a practice of “history from the bottom up,” history which aimed to prioritize the voices of immigrants themselves. The New Social Historians of the 1960s, who grew out of the tradition of ethnic Turnerians of the 1920s-1940s, took “history from the bottom up” as their rallying cry.<sup>73</sup>

Jodi Melamed’s trenchant critique of “official antiracisms” provides an excellent

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*American History*, Ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 191-212.

73. Jon Gjerde, “New Growth on Old Vines: The State of the Field: The Social History of Immigration to and Ethnicity in the United States,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, 4 (1999), 40-65.

compliment to understanding this trajectory of immigration history scholarship. Melamed traces the incorporation and cooptation of oppositional antiracist movements after World War II by the U.S. state and its institutions. Placing the frameworks of immigration history and official antiracisms side by side illuminates the positioning of Naff's work on early Arab American communities as embedded within these racial and antiracist projects. It is within the context of the management and acceptance of certain understandings of racial difference that Naff's work and the peddling thesis must be situated. Melamed identifies three official antiracisms that proceed from the "racial break"<sup>74</sup> period after World War II: racial liberalism from the mid 1940s through the 1960s, liberal multiculturalism from the 1980s to the 1990s, and neoliberal multiculturalism in the 2000s. The formation of the New Social History, then, with its roots in the "bottom up" history of the ethnic Turnerians, coincided with racial liberalism after World War II. Melamed posits that, through incorporation and diffusion via state institutions, racial liberalism quelled the anticolonial antiracisms that emanated from the dissolving empires and genocidal horrors of World War II. Racial liberalism reduced racism to a moral problem and positioned it as an exceptional error within American democracy, all the while demanding conformity from non-whites, in particular African Americans, as a pre-condition for progress.<sup>75</sup> Within the writing of ethnic history, racial

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74. Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Winant uses the term "racial break" to describe the global opposition to white supremacy that happens as a response to Nazism and the holocaust after World War II.

75. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 21-22.

liberalism demanded that racial others prove their deserving of equality through demonstrating their commitment to mainstream “American” values. By the 1980s, liberal multiculturalism had become the official antiracism, beginning its incorporation into U.S. institutions, its epicenter at the university. The condition upon which all official antiracisms were predicated was the association of Americanness with capitalism and the uncritical acceptance of the U.S. as the global leader of the world economy.<sup>76</sup> For liberal multiculturalism in particular, the critique of material inequality along racial lines associated with the civil rights and national liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s had to be deracinated from the critique of white supremacy.<sup>77</sup> Even more so than producing a critique, liberal multiculturalism produced the validation of certain kinds of legible racial difference, predicated upon what Melamed calls the “reasonable, possible, or desirable.” The maintenance of heteronormativity and U.S. cultural and economic hegemony are central to that legibility.<sup>78</sup> We can see this line of official antiracist thought in Naff’s *Becoming American*. Naff emphasizes the capitalistic nature of Syrian immigrants and their quick acceptance of the United States as their new home, while simultaneously reminding the reader of their cultural difference, embedding this story of Arab America within liberal multiculturalism.

At the same time, *Becoming American* anchored Syrian immigrants within the tradition of immigration history. This positioned them implicitly as “white ethnics,” as

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76. Ibid, xvi.

77. Ibid, 27.

78. Ibid, xvi.

the concept of the United States as a “nation of immigrants” had “unified modern American whiteness” throughout the period of racial liberalism.<sup>79</sup> Thus, as Naff situates Arab immigrants within the immigration history tradition without contesting the “color line” that maintained white supremacy, I argue that this creates an implicit alignment of Arab Americans with whiteness. One accepted aspect of Naff’s peddling thesis is that the contact with Americans through peddling facilitated their assimilation. Through interactions with their customers (and their eventual neighbors), Syrians learned English and developed relationships in which Americans began to see and treat them as equals. However, Syrians had to have contact with the *right* kind of Americans in order to access this assimilation. They had to have widespread contact with *white* Americans. If the substantial contact Syrians gained through peddling was with non-white Americans or other non-European immigrants, this would likely not have led to assimilation into white standards, nor would it have likely been considered a sign of their “integration” into U.S. society. Vivek Bald’s work on Bengali migrants in New Orleans shows that their embeddedness in African American and Creole communities did not facilitate any access to privilege.<sup>80</sup>

Often for historians of the early Arab immigrant communities, peddling demonstrates the “natural” entrepreneurial skills and resourcefulness of Syrian migrants. This is a gesture which normalizes the labor of peddling. But the acts of labor that peddling entailed—the transience of traveling door-to-door, the encounter of a racialized

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79. Ibid, 35.

80. Bald, *Bengali Harlem*.

other at the doorstep, the question of origin and quality of the materials sold, and the women who peddled or supported peddling from within their homes—this was deviant labor, acts that were constantly under scrutiny for the implication they wrought upon the Syrian community. What enables the normalization of peddling is not peddling itself; it is the *cessation* of peddling, the purchase of private property, marriage and reproduction, and the transition to small business-owner that enables the narration of normativity in Arab American history. This narrative is dependent upon an uncritical acceptance of whiteness at the center of this framework, wherein the ability of Syrian immigrants and their descendants to buy property and live among, socialize with, marry and reproduce with, and eventually identify as white Americans (for those that did) was enabled by a system of white supremacist capitalism and settler colonialism. Naff writes that, “Syrians certainly felt no virtue in poverty, but they were generally a driven people.

Quintessentially, it was a matter of honor to succeed in America. That was their strength. Their rigorous habits—hard work, thrift, self-denial—alleviated despair and spared them the entrapment at the bottom of the American economy.”<sup>81</sup> The emphasis on “rigorous habits” is a familiar echo of the myth of the “American dream,” one which erases the necessary presence of black Americans at the bottom of the American economy and leaves unarticulated the necessary absence of indigenous people on lands that Americans could settle. The occlusion of the Arab immigrants’ contested place in the U.S. racial hierarchy works to emphasize what Emma Pérez calls a “shared immigrant experience

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81. Naff, *Becoming American*, 192.

with...European immigrants in the United States.”<sup>82</sup> By writing within both traditions of U.S. immigration history and liberal multiculturalism, Naff tells the Arab American “social history of the other as history of the same.”<sup>83</sup> The question of peddling as deviant labor, rather than normative, will be addressed in the second half of this chapter.

## THE PEDDLING THESIS

Despite the long history of Arabs in the United States, scholarship on Arab America was sparse throughout the twentieth century up until the ontological jolt that was September 11, 2001.<sup>84</sup> Although important critical work in Arab American studies began long before 9/11, After 9/11 and the beginning of the reign of the “war on terror,” Arab American studies scholarship has grown in response to the increasingly public spotlight on Arab communities, but slowly. In 1924, Arab American scholar Philip Hitti became the first to publish a major work on the Arab community of the United States. More anthropological than historical, *The Syrians in America* answered questions about the cultural, religious, political, and racial traits of Syrian immigrants. As Hitti’s expertise

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82. Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 9. Pérez argues that the occlusion of a colonial past in the historical narratives of Chicano/as produces this effect. In the case of Arab immigrants, their anticolonial resistance to the Ottoman Empire did not disrupt the creation of this shared experience, because their colonial experience did not implicate the United States before World War I.

83. Ibid, 19.

84. Many important critiques of Arab American studies were produced long before September 11, 2001. However, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the subsequent spotlight on Arab American communities, there has been a slow, but larger recognition of Arab American critiques as well.

was in the history and culture of West Asia, *The Syrians in America* also contained a brief history of Syrians in Syria. Hitti's publication was unprecedented, and it was not until the revival and expansion of American sociology in the 1960s and 1970s that the first group of works on Arab American history were written. In trend with both sociologists and social historians, these works were predominantly quantitative and empirical in nature but shifted increasingly to qualitative methods in the 1980s.<sup>85</sup> Edited volumes proliferated, allowing for a breadth of topic coverage in a relatively short period of time. Community studies were among the most frequent projects, as well as scholarship on the New York Syrian "colony," the writers of *Al Rabitah al Qalamiyyah* (the Pen League), and the prolific Arab American press.<sup>86</sup> Alongside this historical scholarship, Arab American studies was also forming around the exploration of new Arab immigrant communities, political activism and repression regarding Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese liberation, and ethnic and religious identity.<sup>87</sup> Alixa Naff's research on the

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85. Umayyah Cable, "New Wave Arab American Studies: Ethnic Studies and the Critical Turn," *American Quarterly* 61, 1 (2013), 232.

86. Baha Abu-Laban and Michael W. Suleiman, Eds., *Arab Americans: Continuity and Change* (Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1989); Barbara C. Aswad, Ed., *Arabic Speaking Communities in American Cities* (Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc., 1974); Elaine C. Hagopian and Ann Paden, Eds., *The Arab-Americans: Studies in Assimilation* (Wilmette, IL: Medina University Press International, 1969).

87. Nabeel Abraham, "Arab-American Marginality: Mythos and Praxis," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 11, 2 (1989), 17-43; McCarus, Ernest Nasseph, ed., *The Development of Arab-American Identity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Helen Hatab Samhan, "Politics and Exclusion: the Arab American Experience," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 16, 2 (1987), 11-28; Michael W. Suleiman, ed., *Arabs in America: Building a New Future* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

early Arab American community built substantially upon this existing groundwork, but was extensive in its divergent use of oral histories at a time when published studies on Arab Americans were still extremely rare.

Herself the daughter of Syrian immigrants, Alixa Naff was a trained social historian, committed to the documentation and preservation of the early Syrian American community. Published in 1985, Naff's *Becoming American* is a work of staggering research, based on numerous oral history interviews with first and second generation members of the early Arab American community. Scholarship on Arab Americans by Arab Americans themselves was especially rare at this time. I focus on *Becoming American* because of the extent to which it has been cited by other scholars and for its influence on how peddling in the early Arab American community has been understood and theorized. Before the publication of *Becoming American*, Naff's research concerned the early Arab American press and folklore in the Arab immigrant community. The use of oral history methods had the potential to be oppositional. Gary Okihiro describes oral history methods as an alternative to the silencing and distorted self-perceptions that ethnic minorities have experienced under colonial oppression; Okihiro advocates for oral history as a way to recover that silenced and distorted past.<sup>88</sup> While Naff's methodological framework is not explicitly political in the way that Okihiro's is, she defends her decision to rely upon oral history by emphasizing its strengths as a method in "eliciting and recording for older, uneducated, or illiterate informants' primary

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88. Gary Y. Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History: A Reconnaissance into Method and Theory," *Oral History Review* 9,1 (1981), 47.

information that would otherwise be lost.”<sup>89</sup> Naff notes the critical bias in much of the biographies and other “ethnic literature” of the early Arab immigrant community, saying that the majority of the authors “looked back from an acquired, middle-class perspective.”<sup>90</sup> Naff’s method then, at least in the collection of data, if not in the overall focus of the scholarship, centers Arab American perspectives that had been previously marginalized, particularly those of elders, Arabic-speakers, and illiterate community members. Naff’s observation also indicates that she was conscious of class bias in many of these historical and autobiographical accounts. While Naff did not deride peddling as many Syrian elites did at the turn of the century, her scholarship does privilege capitalism and upward economic mobility, as I will show later in the chapter.

Naff’s central thesis is that the work of peddling was integral to the assimilation of Syrian immigrants and their children. Naff shows how these immigrants relied upon a dynamic network of support to begin peddling and how, through the literal routes and social connections of their work, many Syrians eventually settled in smaller towns and rural communities, dispersing themselves throughout the United States. Their English improved and, particularly after they had children in the United States, they used Arabic less and less. Having been largely received with open arms by their customers and having found the ability to accumulate enough money to purchase property, Naff claims, Syrian immigrants abandoned their intentions of returning to Syria and became Americans. Naff says that Syrian immigrants were unique because they had a “deep and broad

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89. Naff, *Becoming American*, 6.

90. *Ibid*, 6.

identification with pack peddling,”<sup>91</sup> similar to the Yankee peddler and German Jewish immigrants. The high numbers of Syrian women who peddled also distinguished the community’s profession from Bengali, Ashkenazi Jewish, and other European immigrant peddlers.

In the process of undertaking her research, Naff produced an Arab American community archive of primary sources, including most notably the oral history interviews (over 2,300 hours of recorded material), as well as photographs and other documents and objects donated by the families that Naff contacted for her research. This collection of materials became the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab American Collection at the Smithsonian Institute. Naff’s archive contains abundant evidence of Syrians at work: the numerous accounts of laboring practices and photos of Syrians in front of their businesses, in factories, on the road as peddlers and the like make clear that this archive is an archive of labor as well as one of the Arab American community. These texts and images provide a framework of Syrians as proper laborers, readying them for inclusion into the “American” nation.

### *Class, Capitalism, and Individualism*

One prominent theme that surfaces in *Becoming American* emphasizes upward economic mobility, entrepreneurship, individualism. Naff is aware of the tendency to romanticize peddling within the early Arab immigrant community, which has occurred in many community-based accounts, including in the accounts of those former peddlers

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91. Ibid, 130.

whom she interviewed. However, in narrating the migration of Syrians to the United States, their contacts with established Syrian suppliers, and the beginnings of their peddling endeavors, Naff's narrative style tends toward the hyperbolic at times. She writes, "In Arab American folklore, stories about immigrant entrepreneurs are second in popularity only to stories about immigrant peddlers. We have liked to think of our forebears as independent businessmen who disdained to work for others and had the courage, against all odds, to strike out on their own..."<sup>92</sup> Her distinction between entrepreneurs and peddlers is blurry though, as many of these same entrepreneur accounts begin with stories of their peddler antecedents. (For instance, the headline of one obituary from 1927 reads as "Landed with \$10.50; Dies a Millionaire: Syrian Peddler Built Up Great Fortune in Oklahoma in Thirty-one years." And this kind of "rags to riches" story gets repeated in stories on early Arab immigrant communities in local venues.) Although Naff recognizes the mythology that is produced about peddling, her characterization of the profession gestures toward that same mythology. For instance, in introducing the subject of Arab peddlers, she writes with dramatic flair: "Not only did they leave their villages to follow [the] promise of quick wealth with a herd instinct, but they pursued that promise to every quarter of the American continent; no region was to prove too remote or forbidding."<sup>93</sup> Repeating this language later on, she calls Syrian peddlers "tenacious, roaming the most remote and forbidding sections of the country."<sup>94</sup> This description

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92. Ibid.

93. Ibid, 128.

94. Ibid, 125.

brings Syrian peddlers in metaphorical parallel to the early European settlers of Turtle Island, likening them to courageous explorers, striking out on their own.

Naff calls the peddlers “pioneers” and, while she acknowledges the proliferation of Syrians in factory and mill work, she claims that Syrians had “an innate disdain for wage labor.”<sup>95</sup> Echoing this discursive distancing from the position of the proletariat, peddlers are “petty capitalists”<sup>96</sup> and “diehard opportunists”<sup>97</sup> who promoted commerce wherever they went.<sup>98</sup> Naff makes the link from the anti-proletariat to the capitalist by emphasizing the individualism of Syrian peddlers, saying that peddling suited Syrians’ “individualistic nature and sense of impermanence” and allowed them to “operate on their own terms.”<sup>99</sup> Naff reinforces this association between peddling and individualism by saying that peddlers were more motivated to succeed than wage earners.<sup>100</sup> Perhaps Naff drew this conclusion from the numerous successful businesses that grew out of peddling practices. But it is equally plausible that peddlers were not more motivated than wage earners, so much as wage earners had little prospect of advancement in the industrial workplace hierarchy. The most emphasized aspect of this association between peddlers and capitalism is the framing of peddlers as entrepreneurs and capitalists at

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95. Ibid, 153.

96. Ibid, 126

97. Ibid, 129

98. Ibid, 125.

99. Ibid, 128.

100. Ibid, 196.

heart. Naff claims that “Syrian immigration and rapid modernization were fortuitously compatible,”<sup>101</sup> as the Syrian peddling sector “revitalized...an anachronistic enterprise and made it function successfully within a technologically oriented economy.”<sup>102</sup>

Interestingly, Naff situates Syrian peddlers as having filled a niche opened by the rapid industrialization of the late nineteenth century—the isolation of rural communities from goods and services as urban populations swelled. In linking peddling with capitalism and entrepreneurship, *Becoming American* renders the labor of peddling, and the economy that supported it, normative.

#### *Periodization and Progress*

Naff relies on periodization as an organizing and simplifying strategy. She divides early Syrian migration into two periods, one from 1880 to 1910 and the other from 1910 to 1930, roughly. She refers to the former period, in which Syrians peddled in highest numbers, as the “pioneer period” and the latter as the “settled period.” Naff does caution against taking these periods as discrete and separate, stating instead that there were two overlapping and intersecting stages that “defy categorization.”<sup>103</sup> But this periodization relies upon a valuated binary regarding mobility, class, and assimilation, as well as an assignment of “progress” to the move from one period (and its associated economic and cultural traits) to the other. The peddling period is characterized by impermanence,

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101. Ibid, 126.

102. Ibid, 198.

103. Ibid, 12.

adventure, and “colonization,” whereas the settled period—marked by the arrival of more Syrian women and the move from peddling to store ownership—signifies the Syrians’ “confidence in the new land.”<sup>104</sup> In order for this binary to function, peddling must be characterized as a temporary endeavor and as a profession done out of necessity and ingenuity. For this reason, peddling is frequently referred to as a “stepping stone” toward “success and middle-class status.”<sup>105</sup> As Naff explains the move many Syrians made from peddling to other forms of non-mobile work, she explains these changes through multiple mechanisms, such as changes in rural economies and the unsustainability of peddling long-term, because it was a physically demanding job. But she also cloaks these explanations in a naturalized progression of upward economic mobility. On the move of some peddlers to open stationary businesses with the capital they made in peddling, Naff terms this a “graduation” of work away from the humble origins of the peddler and calls these shifts “evolutionary stages”<sup>106</sup> in peddling: “They were no longer the humble pack peddler. They saw themselves and acted as ‘classier salesmen dealing with classier people.’ The period of adventure and impermanence had been gradually phasing into a period of permanence and community building.”<sup>107</sup> Here, Naff is also quoting one of her second-generation Arab American informants, echoing the sentiment from Syrian elites

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104. Ibid.

105. Ibid, 130.

106. Ibid, 169.

107. Ibid, 145-146.

that peddling was “too demeaning” and veered too close to begging.<sup>108</sup> In one section that makes plain Naff’s assumptions about the move from mobile work to a localized, physical business, Naff writes: “There must have come a moment when some veterans [of peddling]..., with a bit of surplus capital in hand, and a little more courage and shrewdness than their companions, chose a suitable site, and enter [*sic*] business as suppliers of peddlers.”<sup>109</sup> In the absence of any accounts of how these migrants became suppliers, this narrative employs a framework that glorifies the “foresight and enterprise” of the Syrian men who became suppliers.<sup>110</sup> As many small Syrian communities developed across the midwest and southern United States, produced by peddling routes, Naff calls this process the “piecemeal transition of transients into citizens.”<sup>111</sup> This is how the settled period begins, through the class ascension, assimilation, and physical rootedness of these communities: “The Syrians moved gradually into the ranks of America’s middle class and became willing subjects of the Americanization process.”<sup>112</sup> In these ways, the overarching binary regarding class, mobility, and assimilation in Naff’s narrative operates through several other articulated binaries as well: ethnic enclave/dispersed settlements, Syrian nationalist/American citizen, working class/middle class, and transient/settled or transients/citizens. All of these binarist articulations

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108. Ibid, 129.

109. Ibid, 131.

110. Ibid.

111. Ibid, 140.

112. Ibid, 12.

contribute to an implicit racial spectrum in *Becoming American* from Arab or non-white to white.

### *Gender, Sexuality, and Citizenship*

Migration and peddling had tremendous effects on the practice of marriage within the Syrian community. Those men who migrated on their own in the early years frequently left wives and fiancées in Syria. Even if they didn't, they were still often counted as a potential spouse for someone back home. But migration and peddling work brought with it possibilities for different kinds of lives than were possible in Syria, particularly where family and intimate relationships were concerned. For some these possibilities were pursued and for others those possibilities were of no interest. In the Arab diasporic press, community leaders raised concerns that male peddlers would abandon their familial obligations by breaking engagements, abandoning wives and children, or maintaining multiple families in separate locales.<sup>113</sup> These fears were not paranoid worries; they were founded on reports of such stories that made it back home to the families and communities who expected migrating men to adhere to typical community practices. Naff characterizes the response from elders as “vigilant,” saying that they “showed little inclination to countenance deviations from social norms.”<sup>114</sup> Some returning single men were even asked to provide proof that they had not married

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113. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 137.

114. Naff, *Becoming American*, 231.

while in the United States.<sup>115</sup> Naff acknowledges the heterosexual transgressions of some male peddlers, but she reassures her readers that “the majority of single peddlers remained well within cultural bounds.” Those who didn’t, she suggests, succumbed to “nontraditional marital solutions,” such as marrying outside the community, taking common-law wives, or engaging in “temporary marriages” with American girls.<sup>116</sup> In the Syrian communities that formed in the United States, those Syrians who remained single after a particular age were heavily scrutinized. Naff attributes this to the belief among Syrians that “the state of being single was both unnatural and deplorable.”<sup>117</sup>

While deviations from heterosexual norms was widely discussed, the prospect of homoerotic or homosexual encounters, however, remained unarticulated in community accounts, despite both the frequent occurrence and the public outcry surrounding such encounters at the turn of the century. The expectation that “transient” peddlers should become “settled” business owners was particularly related to paradigms of a heteronormative economy—a paradigm of U.S. national culture which permeated the Arab immigrant community as it sought to survive in a new home. Connotations in the context of the period during which Syrians migrated—and public worries about “tramps,” “hobos,” and migrant workers—mirrored the same concerns about the abandonment of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family. While Margot Canaday’s work elucidates how these concerns of sexual deviance centered upon same-sex sexuality among white

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115. Ibid, 233; Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 137.

116. Naff, *Becoming American*, 233.

117. Ibid, 230.

men, homosexual acts between white and non-white men also triggered disciplinary actions.<sup>118</sup> Nayan Shah's work documents the sexual encounters between South Asian migrant workers and white men during this period—encounters that did not surface in community archives, but rather have been recorded in the arrest records of many of these men.<sup>119</sup> Because of her research into the Arab American press, Naff is aware of the controversies surrounding “unattached” Syrian male peddlers, as she discusses the ways that Syrian leaders were concerned about the instances of male peddlers abandoning existing marital responsibilities or using their life of peddling as a way to avoid those responsibilities altogether. But Naff overlooks the context of transience at the time and its specific implications for same-sex sexual encounters on the road. Some of the anecdotes that Naff provides of cultural misunderstandings are actually rife with unease about gendered boundaries and sexual roles. For instance, one of Naff's informants recounted a story of a Muslim peddler who employed an Arab method for imploring a local farmer to house him for the night: he kissed the man's beard. In response, the farmer beat the peddler until his peddling partner saw this and intervened.<sup>120</sup> The possibility of an accidental homoerotic act is the silent character in this anecdote and the reason for the violence wrought upon the peddler, not merely cultural misunderstanding. It remains unarticulated in Naff's retelling.

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118. Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

119. Nayan Shah, “Between ‘Oriental Depravity’ and ‘Natural Degenerates’: Spatial Borderlands and the Making of Ordinary Americans,” *American Quarterly* 57, 3 (2005), 703-725; Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the American Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

Where women peddlers were concerned, Naff estimates that 75 to 80 percent of Syrian women migrants peddled during the “pioneer period,” between 1890 and 1910.<sup>121</sup> Like their male counterparts, the vast majority of Syrian women peddlers were Christians. This is in part proportional to the overall demographics of the Syrian immigrant community in the first half of the twentieth century. Naff suggests that the absence of Muslim and Druze women peddlers is owed to the timing of their migration during the decline of Syrian peddlers’ heyday toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, and to the conservatism regarding women in those religious traditions.<sup>122</sup> However, two things should be taken into account regarding this assertion. First, there has been documentation of at least one Syrian Muslim woman peddler, who lived in the sizable Syrian Muslim community in North Dakota in the early 1900s.<sup>123</sup> Second, Syrian Christian women peddlers were far from universally sanctioned. While their survival often depended on their participation in work outside the home, many in the Syrian Christian community were concerned that women working outside the home would lead to their sexual and moral decay. Still others were against this deviation from Arab cultural norms because they feared it would prevent Syrian immigrants’ entry into

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120. Naff, *Becoming American*, 164.

121. *Ibid*, 178.

122. *Ibid*, 168.

123. Edward E. Curtis, ed. *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*. Columbia University Press, 2008.

the American middle class.<sup>124</sup> Some Syrian Jews from this time period were also peddlers,<sup>125</sup> but it is unclear if women were among their ranks. Relatedly, within Arab American history, there is a dearth of information on Arab Jews, while simultaneously Arab Jews have largely been subsumed within the rubric of Ashkenazi immigration to the United States. The combination of ethnocentrism, orientalism, and androcentrism present in the existing scholarship has largely occluded significant illuminations on the early history of Arab Jews in the United States. Thus, little is known about the laboring practices of Syrian Jewish women and particularly their relationship to peddling. More research is needed overall to ascertain the participation of non-Christian Syrian women in peddling economies.

Although Naff emphasizes the economic contributions of women in the early Arab American community, she also suggests that women peddlers were eager to leave peddling for the more respectable vocation of marriage and childrearing. Naff asserts that “most gladly gave up peddling to marry and raise a family”<sup>126</sup> while admitting that “no one will ever know how many girls who peddled yearned for some man, any man, to free them from the drudgery.”<sup>127</sup> In contrast to the periodization that fixes peddling’s decline by 1910, numerous accounts show that Syrian women continued to peddle well into the

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124. Akram Khater. “Like Pure Gold: Sexuality and Honour Amongst Lebanese Emigrants, 1890-1920.” *Sexuality in the Arab World*. Eds. Samir Khalaf and John H. Gagnon (London: Saqi, 2006), 93.

125. David de Sola Pool, “The Immigration of Levantine Jews into the United States,” *Jewish Charities* 4 (1914), 12.

126. Naff, *Becoming American*, 178.

127. *Ibid*, 230.

1930s and 1940s, especially “in times of economic crises, between pregnancies and even after the childbearing age.”<sup>128</sup> Thus, while Syrian men began increasingly to take on non-mobile jobs, Syrian women continued to find economic stability and flexibility in peddling. One Syrian woman, ‘Aqlah Brice Al Shediaq, immigrated to the United States by herself in 1894, leaving her husband and children behind in Mount Lebanon. Arriving in West Virginia, she changed her name to “Mary” and began peddling. Despite her illiteracy, she learned rudimentary English, Italian, Polish and Hungarian and built a base of loyal customers.<sup>129</sup> She continued to peddle into her sixties, when her sons persuaded her to stop. But as the depression hit, she took up the profession once more to aid her family and peddled until she was almost seventy years old.<sup>130</sup> Although some women preferred to “escape” into marriage and cease peddling, based on the same kinds of evidence it is equally plausible that women also gained pleasure, independence, and self-worth from their peddling work.

#### AN ARAB AMERICAN HISTORY OF THE POSSIBLE

The 1990s brought change for Arab American studies, as literature and politics moved to the fore. Anthologies on Arab American poetry and other creative writing were published, as well as two important works in Arab American feminist scholarship—Joe

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128. Ibid, 178.

129. Guita Hourani. “‘Aqlah Brice Al Shidyahq: A Woman Peddler from Northern Lebanon,” *Al-Raida* 24, 116-117 (2007), 52-55.

130. Edward Brice al Shidyahq, “Sitta 'Aqlah: A Woman of Faith, Strength, and Dignity. From Blawza to Wheeling, West Virginia,” *Journal of Maronite Studies* 1, 3 (1997).

Kadi's *Food for Our Grandmothers* and Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab*.<sup>131</sup> The field began to move away from the social history and community study models of the 1970s and 1980s. Helen Hatab Samhan's 1987 article "Politics and Exclusion: the Arab American Experience" was "ahead" of the rest of the field in that sense, focusing on the accrual of repercussions for Arab American activism since the 1960s.<sup>132</sup> With the first Gulf war, Arab American studies scholarship began to follow Samhan's lead, as the field was increasingly focused on the political and critical of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>133</sup> The field responded to an urgent contemporary need in the scholarship, but the subject of Arab American history was largely left behind. The question and implications of peddling practices, in particular, were a closed book. *Becoming American*'s peddling thesis accrued narrative power since its publication, specifically through citational practices. A search conducted on Google Scholar shows that *Becoming American* has been cited 138 times since its 1985 publication.<sup>134</sup> As with any figures drawn from an optimized search engine, this figure must be taken as an approximation. However, what is particularly important about this citational practice, in terms of power and Arab American history, is

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131. Kadi, *Food for our Grandmothers*; Shakir, *Bint Arab*.

132. Helen Samhan. "Not Quite White: Race Classification and the Arab American Experience." *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*. Ed. Michael Suleiman. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999: 209-226.

133. Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Developments," *American Studies Journal* 52 (2008).

134. I would prefer to use Web of Science to track this citation, but *Becoming American* does not appear in the database when I search. The University of Minnesota Libraries lists Google Scholar as one of its three preferred citation index systems.

that it is not only the peddling thesis itself that is cited and recirculated (the assertion that early Syrian immigrants assimilated quickly through the work of peddling). In addition to the thesis, the ideological cloak of class, race, and gender/sexual normativity often circulates along with it: that Syrians are “natural” capitalists and entrepreneurs, they are culturally fit for whiteness and American citizenship, and implicitly, they value the same system of gender and sexual normativity as white, middle class Americans do. The early Arab American community’s archival legacy is a rich one, albeit still small, left through family and organizational papers, as well as a prolific Arab American press and the literary works of the well-known Pen League authors. But these histories most often represent the most elite of these immigrants; or put another way, these histories are based upon the assumption of middle-class American values and whiteness as aspirational and attainable. Although Naff’s use of oral histories enabled a wider account of early Arab American life than was previously available, her narration of that collected material replicated the many of the ideological assumptions of earlier Arab American histories.

In describing the small Syrian settlements that developed along peddling routes, Naff explains that living in crowded quarters was a new experience for those who came to the United States from villages: “...in the settlement, one might share a tight space not only with relatives or fellow villagers but with strangers. Consequently, the settlement provided opportunities for new relationships not usually available in the village.”<sup>135</sup> This insight is given within the context of Naff’s discussion of marriage norms, but we cannot be sure that marriages were the only relationships that grew out of these new

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135. Naff, *Becoming American*, 206.

circumstances. What kinds of relationships were these and how were they different? Were these marriages or friendships or intimate relationships that blurred boundaries between the sexual and the platonic? Were they welcome changes or ones that chafed against the expectations of certain boundaries? And what of sexual violence? Naff calls this situation one of “opportunity,” a characterization which is inherently positive. For instance, one of Naff’s interviewees describes a house in Spring Valley, Illinois, where Syrian peddlers slept when they came through town. Peddlers often slept “about two dozen at a time—both men and women, husbands and wives, single men and single women—slept there on the floor, two or three families to one room.”<sup>136</sup> The “opportunities” for various relationships would have been abundant in a place with intimate and novel mixing of people. What of night-time explorations between eager friends? Or of the unwelcome advances from an older man toward a young child? I am suggesting that this discussion of living arrangements and relationships be centered upon *possibilities* rather than opportunities. “Possibility” removes the impetus to characterize a particular historical situation as positive or negative, and instead allows for the complexity and epistemological mess of those situations. “Possibility” creates space for the differences in community opinions about various relationships and intimacies, for the wide variation in experiences of those relationships and intimacies by their participants, and for the reality of sexual violence and abuse that was also present in relationships. What would it look like, then, for Arab American history to account for the possible, rather than the “opportune”? Similarly, how would our accounts of Arab American

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136. Ibid, 207.

history and the knowledge produced by such accounts be different if the imperative to search for the conclusive was replaced by the reception of the possible? In the following, I take one Arab American historical figure as a case study in accounting for the possible, showing how different sources allow for more complicated retellings of Arab American history.

*What the Census May Tell*

George Karem was born in Hamat, Syria (Mount Lebanon) in 1874. By 1900, George was living in Louisville, Kentucky, having arrived in the United States two years earlier. He was a peddler of “notions” and lived at the home of his cousins, Salaam and Karem Shaheen, with Karem’s wife, children, and their other cousin, who appears on the census as “Narzna.” All of the adult males in the household worked as notions peddlers. The 1900 census, which lists this information, also indicates that George Karem has been married for 5 years by this time; however, his wife is not living with him, nor are any children. Ten years later, George’s whereabouts are uncertain. There is a “Geo Karem” living in Louisville in 1910, but he is listed as a “boarder” with a different family and his age is different. Because “George” and “Karem” were both common names for Arab Christians from the Levant, it is possible that this is a different person, even in such a small city. By 1920, the family of our George Karem, cousin of Salaam and Karem from Hamat, is in Louisville. His wife Mary, son Nicholas, daughter-in-law Mary, and grandson Philip are all living together, but George is not with them. Another one of George and Mary’s children, Issac, is living in the same building with his wife and five

daughters. Mary Karem, George’s wife, is listed as 69 years old and widowed. This put her at 23 years her husband’s senior. In the 1930 census, Mary, the mother, is listed as 72 years old and widowed, putting her at sixteen years older than her husband. Either age difference, with the wife significantly older than the husband, was quite rare for this time and in the Syrian community. In 1930, their daughter, Fannie Karem, is also living with Mary the elder, Nicholas, daughter-in-law Mary, and their increasing numbers of children (six at this point). Fannie is listed as widowed at age 45. Mary Karem lived with her son and daughter-in-law up until her death in 1940 at the age of 89. Her death certificate estimates that she was born in 1855. There is no death certificate that can be located for George Karem.

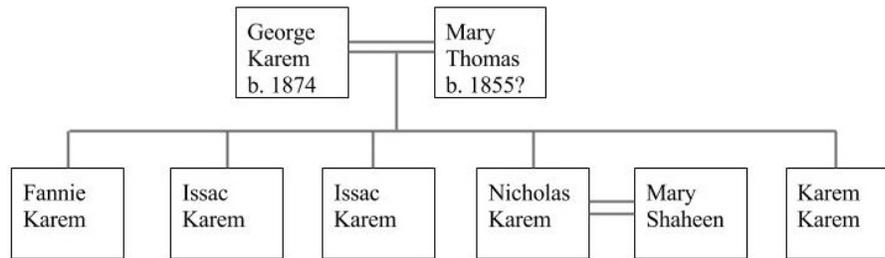


Figure 1. Karem Family Tree Excerpt. Mary Thomas’s birth year is an estimate from her death record. Other recorded birth years for Mary were 1851 and 1858.

*What Rumor May Tell*

George Karem, son of Karem who was son of Michael Karem, was born in 1873 or 1874 in Hamat, Syria (Mount Lebanon). The names of the women from whom George Karem descended did not survive the journey across the Atlantic. In the late nineteenth century, George came to the United States and was a peddler throughout the southern states. His son Nick, my great-grandfather, was also born in Hamat, along with his sisters

and brothers, who lived with their mother Mary. They came to the United States some time after George, settling in Louisville, Kentucky, where they had relatives. The first time I asked a family member what happened to George Karem, I was told that he died in Vicksburg, Mississippi, where there lived other Syrians from the Hamat area. I made a notation next to his name on the family tree, "died in Vicksburg, MS." My mother remembered that her father (Philip, a grandson of George) told her this, but no one can confirm when or how he died, or even if this is true. Several years later I asked again about George. My great uncle, another one of George's grandsons, said that after establishing himself with steady work in the United States, George was supposed to send for his wife and children, but he never did. All his family knew was that he was gone. Five generations after George's arrival, it is rumored that he had a second family in Louisiana or Mississippi. A cousin who attended a medical convention in the South several years ago added fuel to the rumor, when he returned and told the family that several people either mistook him for another Lebanese American man who was local to the area or asked him if he was related to a local Lebanese American family. The younger generations, myself included, relish the news of potentially scandalous family business, but I appear to be the only one that has tried to substantiate or disprove the rumors. I found another George Karem from Hamat who filed an intent for naturalization in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1920 and petitioned for naturalization in 1926. He was married to a woman named Azzizie Karem, from Bishmizzine, Syria (Mount Lebanon), and by 1926 they were living in Santa Monica, California. They had five children. This may or may not be the same George Karem. This George Karem lists his birth year as 8 years

later than my great-great-grandfather. He also lists his name as “Karem George Karem”. These details could be significant indications of a different identity than the ancestor in question. Or they could be indications of my George Karem’s attempt to make a new life for himself, as they were details that could be forged easily.

George and Mary Karem—my great-great-grandparents—had five children: Fannie, Issac, Jameelah, Nicholas, and Karem. Figure 1 shows an excerpt from the Karem family tree as it exists in my family: Mary and George married and had five children. But given the dates of the children’s births in relation to their parents, the first three children were either from a previous relationship or George and Mary had them out of wedlock. The former is more likely, as George would have been only eleven years old when Fannie, the first child, was born. In contrast, Mary was thirty years old when she had Fannie, an advanced age compared to many of her Syrian female contemporaries. Nicholas was the first to be born to George and Mary as a married couple, arriving the year of, or year after, their marriage in 1895.

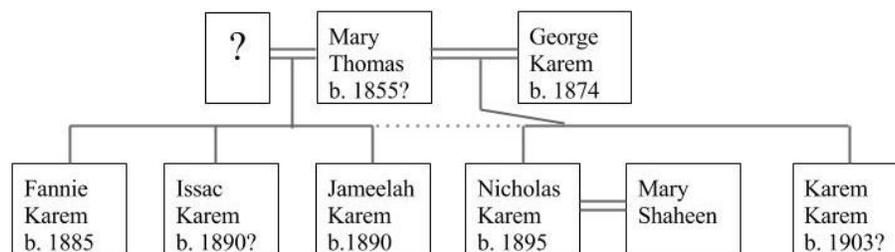


Figure 2. Karem Family Tree Excerpt, Re-envisioned. Isaac and Karem Karems’ birth years are taken from census records but were not clearly legible.

Within my family, mystery, secrecy, and speculation surround my great-great-grandfather, George Karem. Beginning my foray into census and immigration

documents, I acknowledged my desire to find the definitive “proof” of his familial abandonment. I suspected that he was a bigamist; I wanted to know this and substantiate it. And yet, even as my own scholarly inquest was tuned toward his life, what surfaced was perhaps an equally, if not more so, riveting question regarding the life of his wife, Mary. Did Mary have a husband before Nick? Or a lover out of wedlock? Could her first two children have been the product of rape? Would any of those possibilities have diminished her chances of securing a future through marriage? Few people in my family seem to remember or recount the significant age difference between George and Mary. Perhaps George’s disappearance facilitated the forgetting of this important detail. Perhaps along with it, the details of Mary’s life before her marriage to George—the birth of her first two children and possibly a prior marriage—succumbed to a forgetting as well. Once I began to ask about Mary, however, rather than George, I learned another piece of family scandal. Apparently, Mary had an affair with the husband of Fannie, her eldest daughter, who was recorded as living with her in the 1930 census. After this, Fannie’s husband fled to South America; the listing of Fannie as “widowed” on the census is a trace of her husband’s flight. The normalization of George and Mary’s union and George’s “death” occluded inter-generational knowledge about the realities of the village economy in Syria, including negotiations of marriage, family, and sex that fell outside of what was deemed traditional. Although, most certainly, those who would have known the origins of Mary and George’s relationship crossed the Atlantic as well, the knowledge itself may not have.

The most compelling aspects of rumor and gossip, for the purposes of historical

knowledge production, are not about the veracity of the rumor's claims. Rather, the function of rumor as a means of communication and as a vehicle for transmitting cultural information about sexuality are more interesting questions. Gayatri Spivak calls rumor a "subaltern means of communication" to which no origin can be traced. The claims within the rumor are irrelevant; rumor is not error, it is errant. It signals transgression and relays information that is "always assumed to be pre-existent."<sup>137</sup> Similarly, Clare Potter writes that rumors and gossip, particularly those concerning sexuality, can be characterized as "truths that are not factual."<sup>138</sup> So what are the non-factual truths that the rumors in my family relay? That George Karem betrayed his duties as a husband and a father. That Mary Karem, his wife, was sexual in ways that exceeded the bounds of community expectations. That with sex and relationships came control, obligation, and discipline. These truths also point to the deviant labor of peddling: a profession which enabled and masked George Karem's deviations from heteronormative community obligations.

I end this chapter with a story of my own family's history buttressed by rumor, because I am conscious of the possibilities of its components for historical meaning-making. While many of the details of my great-great-grandfather's and great-great-grandmother's lives can be verified through census records, city directories, and other

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137. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 211, 214.

138. Claire Bond Potter, "Queer Hoover: Sex, Lies, and Political History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 15, 3 (2006), 360.

vital documents, the aspects of their lives that point to sexual non-normativity are harder to pin down through traditional historical methods. These details linger in speculative sources like rumor. While the challenges of historical methodology from the starting point of fragments and rumors are many, Wendy Anne Warren manages to reconstruct a possibility of the past in a way that provides both historical sustenance and historiographical instruction. Working from the basis of one paragraph in an English merchant's travelogue, which refers anecdotally to the rape of an unnamed enslaved African woman in the seventeenth century New England colonies, Warren's reconstructed history reveals as much about the process of writing history as it does about the historical events of her subject. Using available archival material about seventeenth century New England, the transatlantic slave trade, and the slave-owner and merchant figures from her story who were written into history, Warren imagines what could have been the experiences and encounters of this woman. Warren is intentional in the creativity of her analysis, which "makes visible the gaps in [her] method" and asks, "Without imagination, how can we tell such stories?"<sup>139</sup> While it would be too dismissive to call her research a work of fiction, her method exposes the necessity of creativity, imagination, and thus the use of certain "fictions" (albeit ones that are historically informed and cautiously proposed) in the work of historical analysis. In a move of intellectual vulnerability, Warren also lays bare the tentative nature of her analysis: "I don't know anything about the woman who ended up on Noddle's Island in 1638—

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139. Wendy Anne Warren, "The Cause of Her Grief": The Rape of a Slave in Early New England," *The Journal of American History* 93, 4 (2007), 1049.

indeed, I suppose it is possible that Josselyn [the English merchant] made up the whole story for reasons we cannot fathom, or that he misunderstood the situation, or that I have misunderstood the situation myself. But I have chosen to believe Josselyn's version. Someone else, infuriated by my methods, can tell a different story; I embrace that possibility."<sup>140</sup> The uncertainty of sources like rumor does not diminish their validity, but rather leads us to the realm of the creative and the imaginary as a method of knowledge production and recenters a history of gender and sexuality within Arab America. This chapter presents but a prelude to what those possibilities might be.

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140. Ibid.

## Chapter 2

### Peddlers, “Persians,” and Roving Sexual Threats: Syrian Male Peddlers in Popular Culture

As Syrian peddlers traveled increasingly through rural spaces of the southern, mid-western, and western United States, and interacted with people outside of their own immigrant communities, curiosity and anxiety grew about their presence. Such feelings were often expressed in popular portrayals of the Syrian peddler, particularly of Syrian men. Male peddlers appeared in poetry, short stories, novels, and children’s books, as well as in the news media. Regardless of the format, all of these genres put Syrian otherness upon display for the American public in two distinct ways. First, Syrian peddlers brought what was understood as an exotic difference to the doorsteps of aspiring-middle-class Americans via their goods for sale and their own racialized bodies. While household staples like sewing materials, soap, and linens were essential in a peddler’s pack, so too were items that elicited fantasies of a far-off place, such as holy water from Jerusalem, rosaries, lace, and silk. Second, male Syrian peddlers posed a sexual threat to the women who purchased their goods. The manufacturers of this threat imagined white women and their daughters, the epicenter of the domestic middle-class idyll, at home alone and defenseless against the seductions of the peddler and his wares. The curiosity and anxiety about Syrian peddlers also contained an underlying desire for this racially and sexually different figure. Recurring throughout both of these themes of otherness is the idea that manipulation and Oriental trickery are central to the economic

success of the peddler.

Despite the small size of the Syrian community, male Syrian peddlers appeared fairly frequently in U.S. archives of popular culture. The vast majority of these appearances reiterate the same set of ideas about Syrian peddlers, including the excitement of the goods they offered, their propensity to manipulate their customers, and the seductiveness of their “Oriental” sensibilities. The most well-known representation of a Syrian peddler is actually a work that few would recognize as such, even though it continues to circulate as part of U.S. popular culture today. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* exemplifies the portrayal of the peddler as an exotic and manipulative threat, but it also cemented the image of the Syrian peddler in the public imagination for years to come.<sup>141</sup> *Oklahoma!* was revolutionary for the American musical genre, as it was the first of its kind to fully integrate musical numbers into the plot. It was also the longest running show of its time. Set in Indian Territory in the early 1900s, shortly before it became the state of Oklahoma, the plot revolves around settler matchmaking, feuds between cowboys and farmers, and glorified narratives of U.S. democracy and the western frontier.<sup>142</sup> While these artistic works were not state-produced, they do form a *national* cultural archive: the stories within them demonstrate

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141. I would like to thank Jigna Desai for bringing *Oklahoma!* to my attention and for her insights into the relationships between sexuality, racialization, and settler colonialism.

142. "Indian Territory" was a region inside the Louisiana purchase that shifted and reduced in size every time a new state was created. It ceased to exist after Oklahoma became a state in 1907.

the social parameters through which belonging in the U.S. nation is possible, and for whom, as well as the disciplining that is necessary to achieve that belonging.

Amidst an almost entirely Euro-American settler cast, *Oklahoma!* features a lone non-European figure, that of the Persian peddler, named Ali Hakim. While many view this West Asian migrant figure's presence in the midst of American "homesteading" life as an anomaly, he was anything but. In fact, he was necessary to it. Indeed, immigrant peddlers were a common feature of rural life in the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. The character of Ali Hakim is commonly perceived as an Ashkenazi Jewish character, despite his national origins, because of the stereotypes he embodies and because of the association between peddling and Jews. However, *Oklahoma!* was not an original play; it was based on a play written over a decade earlier, called *Green Grow the Lilacs*, by Cherokee playwright Lynn Riggs. In Riggs's play, the peddler character was modeled on a real figure from Riggs's childhood growing up in the Cherokee nation — a Syrian peddler. Despite the Syrian origins of the character, the Arabness of the peddler has not been critically analyzed.

In this chapter, I explore representations of male Syrian peddlers in popular media, made emblematic by *Oklahoma!*, and show how these representations betray anxieties about the presence of Syrian and West Asian immigrants within U.S. society. The Syrian peddler became a vessel for white American concerns about the economic position of white small business owners, maintaining the purity and virtue of white women, and the overall demographic changes in the American citizenry — the figure of the peddler proved to be very flexible for these purposes. The anxieties surrounding

peddlers hinged specifically on the notion of a racialized gender and sexual difference inherent in Syrian and West Asian men. At the same time, a certain amount of desire surfaced along with these anxieties, stemming as well from the fabricated exoticism of the “Oriental.” I have chosen to focus on a specific iteration of these instances of representation — the musical and film versions of *Oklahoma!* and the original play that preceded them — because it allows for a comparison of the portrayal of the Syrian peddler in the same story throughout multiple temporalities of early Arab American history.

While the character of Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!* has been linked to stereotypical representations of Ashkenazi Jews,<sup>143</sup> and was recognizable as such to American audiences because of the prominence of German Jews in peddling professions throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, I argue that scholars must take seriously the Arabness of the peddler as well. This analysis has two major consequences. First, the interdependence of anti-Jewish and anti-Arab racializations surfaces and necessarily levels a blow to the ontological dichotomy between Arab and Jew.<sup>144</sup> Second, taking seriously the Arabness of the peddler character reveals the sexual non-normativity of this figure and the anxieties about miscegenation that this figure posed in the context of U.S. settler colonialism. My analysis shows that the jokes relating to Ali Hakim’s effeminacy

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143. Andrea Most, “‘We Know We Belong to the Land’: The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*” *PMLA* 113, 1 (1998), 77-89.

144. I prefer to use the term “anti-Jewish” rather than “anti-Semitic” because the former is more specific. Not only is the racial category of the Semite an Orientalist philological construction, as Edward Said showed in *Orientalism*, but that category included Syrians and other Arabs, as well as European Jews.

and sexuality in *Oklahoma!* cannot be separated from the character's racialization as Arab and West Asian. These jokes function to render the peddler "queer," both by questioning his sexuality and gender and by rendering him apart from the settler community. Moreover, this queerness is not legible when looking only for Jewish stereotypes and taking the peddler's "Persian" origin for granted. In addition to relating to the peddler's ethnic background, this queerness stemmed from the anxieties about transient labor and homeless men that grew in the first half of the twentieth century. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that *Oklahoma!* resolves these anxieties surrounding Syrian peddlers through inclusion into the community: an inclusion via forced gender, sexual, and economic assimilation. This resolution demonstrates how a specific heteronormative economy was essential to the settler colonial project.

Lynn Riggs's play *Green Grow the Lilacs* was written in 1929 and first produced on Broadway in 1931. It ran for 64 performances (approximately two months) and toured throughout the Midwest. It was later nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.<sup>145</sup> In 1943, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein adapted *Green Grow the Lilacs* into the musical *Oklahoma!*. Riggs's play included a number of folk songs, but these were replaced by Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical score. The story, however, remained close to the original and much of Riggs's text has been preserved in *Oklahoma!*'s script. *Oklahoma!* became an instant success; it ran for five years on Broadway, for three years in London's

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145. Lynn Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," *The Cherokee Night and Other Plays* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 2-105.

West End, and then for ten years in the United States with a second company.<sup>146</sup> In 1955, *Oklahoma!* was made into a film, prolonging its life in U.S. popular culture even further. Although the film was directed by Fred Zinnemann, Rodgers and Hammerstein remained closely involved to ensure the film's loyalty to the musical. Only two songs were eliminated from the film and one small change was made to the script. The film won two Academy Awards. Both the original *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *Oklahoma!* continue to be performed today, although the latter enjoys much wider acclaim and notoriety. In 2007, the 1955 film version of *Oklahoma!* was named to the National Film Registry, which catalogs films of cultural, artistic, or historic importance to the nation. Because of its wide circulation, its central message about U.S. national identity, and its explicit designation as a national film, the archive of *Oklahoma!* is not only a popular culture archive, it is a national archive.

The names of the major characters remained the same throughout the play, the musical and the film with two exceptions: "Jeeter Fry" in *Green Grow the Lilacs* became "Jud Fry" in *Oklahoma!* and the nameless peddler in the former became "Ali Hakim" in the latter. Three principal characters were added in *Oklahoma!*: Will Parker is Ado Annie Carnes's suitor who competes with Ali Hakim, Andrew Carnes is Ado Annie's father, and Gertie Cummings is Ali Hakim's eventual wife. The storyline involving these characters is essential to the expansion of the role of the peddler. Through these three artistic works, the figure of the Syrian peddler has reverberated in U.S. popular culture

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146. Tim Carter, *Oklahoma! The Making of an American Musical* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

for decades, unbeknownst to many.

In tracing the different anxieties that surface through the peddler character in these three iterations of the same story — the original play, the musical, and the film — the shifting relationship of Arabs and West Asians to U.S. settler colonialism becomes visible. Thus, I use this chapter as a starting point for placing Arab American history in conversation with studies of settler colonialism, centering the relationship of the Syrian peddler to “the frontier.” Syrian peddlers were facilitators of settler colonialism — they made the literal settling of native lands in the west, midwest, and southwest more feasible for Euro-American settlers by providing the convenience of access to goods that rural areas often lacked in comparison with cities. And at the same time that Syrian peddlers were necessary to this process, their perceived racial, gender, and sexual difference posed a threat to the communities they helped to shape. They were queer figures in a landscape that was struggling to normalize itself to a middle-class, Anglo, American ideal. Remembering these figures and understanding the labor, desire, and anxiety associated with them interrupts the racialized nostalgia of the American frontier.

Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* is commonly understood to be a musical about American unity and Manifest Destiny, created to provide uplifting and reassuring entertainment during World War II.<sup>147</sup> The musical tells the story of courtship between

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147. Carter, *Oklahoma!*; Most, ““We Know We Belong to the Land””; Bruce Kirle, “Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in American Consciousness,” *Theatre Journal* 55, 2 (2003), 251-274.

Laurey Williams, an orphaned land-owner who lives with her widowed Aunt Eller, and Curly McLain, a local cowboy. The central obstacle to their love is Jud, a villainous farmhand living and working on Laurey's property. While the majority of the characters in the story are fully-accepted members of the community, two are clearly cast as outsiders. The first, Jud, is portrayed as violent and as a potential sexual predator. Although Jud's racial origins are not explicit in the musical, scholars have variously interpreted his character as symbolizing "bad" Jewishness or blackness.<sup>148</sup> The second outsider, the peddler Ali Hakim, is the antidote to the violence of Jud's storyline. Ali Hakim's role is that of the jester, providing comic relief for the audience, while simultaneously embodying the anxieties about peddlers and West Asians that were perpetuated throughout the early twentieth century. Ali Hakim's storyline is secondary, chronicling his flirtation with Ado Annie and her involvement with suitor Will.

Scholars have thoroughly examined the Jewishness of Ali Hakim. The most cited analysis of *Oklahoma!*'s peddler was produced by Jewish Studies scholar Andrea Most. First in a 1998 *PMLA* essay and later in her book, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, Most outlines *Oklahoma!* as a lesson in assimilation for Jews. Most contrasts Ali Hakim, the "assimilable white ethnic," to Jud, who is likened to the racial other that cannot be assimilated and must be cast out (or killed, in this case). Most also contends that Ali's assimilation relies upon his social distance from Jud, who she argues

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148. Roger Cushing Aikin, "Was Jud Jewish? Property, Ethnicity, and Gender in *Oklahoma!*" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, 3 (2005), 277-83.; Most, "We Know We Belong to the Land."

is the character in the play that represents blackness.<sup>149</sup> This process of assimilation, and its stakes for Jews and African Americans, is the focus of Most's analysis — not the Jewishness of the peddler. However, because Ali Hakim is described as “Persian,” Most has to make an argument for why this character should be read as Jewish. The Europeanness of Jewry is assumed here—neither Rodgers and Hammerstein nor subsequent scholars consider the existence of West Asian Jews, despite the evidence that there were also peddlers among the small populations of Syrian and Yemeni Jews.<sup>150</sup>

*Making Americans* cites the negligible number of Persian peddlers at the time as the first piece of evidence for the character's Jewishness, and contrasts this with the large numbers of European Jewish peddlers. Connecting the peddler's name “Hakim” to the Hebrew “hacham,” *Making Americans* surmises that the show's Jewish creators would have been aware of the name's Hebrew meaning of “clever man.” *Making Americans* does not acknowledge that Hakim is an Arabic word which also means “wise man”. *Making Americans* notes that the original Broadway cast sought an identifiably Jewish actor for the role (trying at one point for Groucho Marx and eventually casting Yiddish actor Joseph Buloff). In a footnote, Most also mentions that, even in Lynn Riggs's original play that inspired *Oklahoma!*, the peddler was played by a well-known Jewish

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149. Most, ““We Know We Belong to the Land,”” 86.

150. Dina Dahbany-Miraglia, “Yemenite Jewish Immigration and Adaptation to the United States, 1903-1941,” *Crossing the Waters*, Ed. Eric J. Hooglund (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 119-132.

actor, Lee Strasberg.<sup>151</sup> *Making Americans* never mentions the character's Syrian origins, stemming from the presence of actual Syrian peddlers in the Oklahoma region.

This chapter of *Making Americans* was based on Most's *PMLA* article published six years prior. The *PMLA* article drew a number of letters in response, the majority of which concerned themselves with the argument of Jud's blackness and the desire of assimilation for Jews as portrayed in *Oklahoma!*. One letter, however, asked Most to consider two things in her analysis: first, that the author of *Oklahoma!*'s predecessor, Lynn Riggs, was a member of the Cherokee nation and was highly conscious of the politics of race and assimilation in Indian Territory at the time of the play; and second, that the peddler was Syrian in the original story and that should be taken into account.<sup>152</sup> In response, Most thanked the reader for the reminder of Riggs's background and consciousness of Indian politics, but offered no explanation for why the Syrian origins of the peddler would continue to be ignored. When *Making Americans* was published six years later, it repeated the same arguments as the *PMLA* article, still with no mention of the peddler's Arabness. Most claimed, "Ali's Jewish identity is most clearly established by the authorial role he plays throughout the show. A seller of stories, fantasies, and myths, Ali seems the logical representation of his real-life creators."<sup>153</sup> Because there is never the allowance that the peddler could have been *both* Jewish and Persian, or Jewish

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151. Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 89n19.

152. Sandra K. Baringer, "Oklahoma! and Assimilation," *PMLA* 113, 3 (1998), 452.

153. Most, *Making Americans*, 113-14.

and Arab, this analysis reinforces the ontological privileging of Ashkenazi Jews within Jewish Studies. It also sets Jewish legibility *against* Arab/West Asian legibility, as if the two cannot exist simultaneously. Scholars continue to cite Andrea Most's argument for the (Ashkenazi) Jewishness of Ali Hakim, letting the Jewishness of the peddler and implicitly, his Europeanness, stand in for the entirety of the character.<sup>154</sup>

Although Most seems to actively exclude any mention of the peddler's Arabness, it does appear that Rodgers and Hammerstein intended to make the peddler a "thinly-veiled" representation of a Jewish peddler. (Most notes that Hammerstein even introduced himself to one audience as "Ali Hakimstein".) Interestingly, the journey from "Syrian" to "Persian" in the making of *Oklahoma!* has not just been overlooked, it actually remains somewhat of a mystery. The character started as a Syrian peddler with no name in Riggs's play, but in the first two drafts of the musical, the peddler became an Armenian by the name of Kalendarian Kalazian.<sup>155</sup> It is unclear how Rodgers and Hammerstein departed from "Syrian" and arrived at "Armenian", but soon enough "Armenian" disappeared and the peddler became Ali Hakim, the Persian. Tim Carter, who has extensively chronicled the life of *Oklahoma!*, speculates that the Armenian background was dropped because the director of the show, Rouben Mamoulian, was an actual Armenian.<sup>156</sup> In addition to these nationalities, the peddler character was also

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154. Carter, *Oklahoma!*; Kirle, "Reconciliation, Resolution"; Max Wilk, *Ok! The Story of Oklahoma!* Applause Theater and Cinema Books, 2002.

155. Carter, *Oklahoma!*, 85.

156. *Ibid.*, 189.

referred to as “Turkish” in correspondence regarding casting.<sup>157</sup> While no scholars have verified this, several sources claim that the Jewish actor Joseph Buloff, who played Ali Hakim in the original Broadway cast, actually created the role of Ali Hakim.<sup>158</sup> Of course, none of these sources acknowledge the earlier Syrian peddler from Riggs’s play. Curiously as well, Carter makes no mention of Buloff’s involvement in the development of Ali Hakim in his research on *Oklahoma!*. While the rationale for each of the peddler’s changes in national origin is unknown, the coherence among the changes is clear:

Rodgers and Hammerstein made decisions that enabled the peddler to retain his “Middle Eastern” origins while simultaneously imbuing him with what they understood as anti-Jewish (Ashkenazi) stereotypes. What, then, does it mean that a West Asian or “Middle Eastern” character was a permissible vehicle for anti-Jewish stereotypes? And what is the significance in rendering the Syrian origin of Riggs’s character negligible? Rather than taking the “Middle Eastern” trait of the peddler as a metaphor, this approach takes into account both the Arab origins of the peddler and the Ashkenazi Jewish influence on the creation of Ali Hakim, revealing the interdependence of early Arab and Ashkenazi Jewish racializations in the United States and the gendered and sexualized dimensions of

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157. Ibid.

158. Benjamin Ivry, “Lewis J. Stadlen: Rekindling a Talented Jewish Character Actor,” Dec. 7, 2010. <http://blogs.forward.com/the-arty-semite/133739/lewis-j-stadlen-rekindling-a-talented-jewish-char/#ixzz2ONW1xC00> Accessed Mar. 23, 2013.; Yivo Institute for Jewish Research, “Guide to the Papers of Joseph Buloff (1899-1985); Luba Kadison (1906-2006),” 2009. <http://findingaids.cjh.org/?pID=426470> Accessed Mar. 23, 2013.; New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, “Guide to the Joseph Buloff Papers, 1925-1993.” February 2007. <http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/thebulof.pdf>

Arab racialization.

## A ROVING THREAT, A QUEER DANGER

*Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931)

In the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the peddler only appears in two scenes—first, when he comes with Ado Annie to visit Aunt Eller and Laurey, and in the following scene when he sells Jeeter a knife. The Syrian peddler first enters the play as he is traveling along his peddling route, accompanied by Ado Annie. His character is constituted immediately as dishonest, manipulative, and seductive. Aunt Eller is furious with him for having sold her an eggbeater that was promised to do much more than beat eggs the last time he visited. In response, the peddler mocks her fury by offering her another one. Laurey is concerned about Ado Annie’s naiveté regarding the peddler’s intentions with her. Laurey reminds Ado Annie that peddlers are not to be trusted with matters of the heart. When Laurey cautions Ado Annie against a relationship with the peddler, she remarks: “You don’t want to git to like a peddler man *too* good, Ado Annie. You hear me? They got wives in ever’ state in the union [*sic*].”<sup>159</sup> Signaling the circulation of peddlers as sexually dangerous as common knowledge, this statement mirrors the anxieties that many people had about the detachment of peddlers and other migratory men from their home communities and normative family structures. As the peddler greets Laurey, he excitedly remarks how much she has grown up and kisses her arm and hand. Laurey rebuffs his flirtatiousness, but Riggs’s stage directions indicate that

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159. Riggs, “Green Grow the Lilacs,” 33.

she is “a little pleased, in spite of herself.”<sup>160</sup> Laurey has a back-and-forth with Ado Annie, again marking the peddler as a primarily sexual being. Laurey asks Annie “Is that the way he talks to you Ado Annie?” When Annie replies “Aw, he don’t talk to me!” Laurey exclaims, “Mercy, whut does he *do* to you [*sic*]!”<sup>161</sup> Significantly, this scene takes place in Laurey’s bedroom, where they have gathered to look at the peddler’s goods for sale. It is implied that the peddler may have a scheme to be alone in the room with the young women, when he suggests to Aunt Eller that he has merchandise for her outside with his horse. Aunt Eller exclaims, “Not gonna leave you and two girls in no bedroom, all by yerselves [*sic*].”<sup>162</sup>

Echoing the prominent stereotypes of Syrian peddlers in the early twentieth century, the seduction surrounding the peddler is equally to do with his merchandise. Laurey works herself into an “abstracted ecstasy” when dreaming aloud of the things she’d like to have. Laurey’s monologue delves into the close association between middle-class white femininity, desire, consumption, and fantasy: “...Want things I cain’t tell you about. Cain’t see ‘em clear. Things nobody ever heard of....Not only things to look at and hold in yer hands. Things to happen to you! Things so nice if they ever did happen yer heart ud quit beatin’, you’d fall down dead. They ain’t no end to the things I want. Everything you got wouldn’t be a starter fer me, Mister Peddler Man [*sic*]!”<sup>163</sup> Laurey’s

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160. Ibid.

161. Ibid, 34.

162. Ibid.

163. Ibid, 36.

desires are simultaneously material and spiritual, alluding to the exotic (“things nobody ever heard of”), the experiential (“things to happen to you!”), and the insatiable (“they ain’t no end to the things I want”) as essential components to the existential questions of Laurey’s life. The language of her monologue mirrors the rising importance of commercial consumption and its constructed connection to emotional fulfillment in the cultivation of a white, middle-class femininity.<sup>164</sup> While Laurey is not presented as middle class, she did inherit land from her parents and exhibits an aspiration of upward mobility through the items and life she desires. The acquisition of “exotic” items was a way for the working classes to portray their middle-class ambitions. Each of these desires could also be sexual. Merchandise from “the Orient,” particularly items associated with the Ottoman Empire, invoked the sexualized space of the harem.<sup>165</sup> The labor of the Syrian peddler, then, was necessary for the constitution of his buyers as white and middle-class (or middle-class-aspiring) American women. Both the body of the peddler, in its racialized and sexualized form of difference symbolizing “the East,” and the goods the peddler provided contributed to this labor. The notion of cosmopolitanism, the display of knowledge of the world beyond one’s local confines, was essential to this consumption, and a racial and imperial hierarchy was part of that cosmopolitanism.<sup>166</sup> Syrian peddlers and the cultures (for consumption) they represented, could be desired, but

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164. Kristin L. Hoaganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

165. *Ibid.*, 52-53.

166. *Ibid.* 14.

they also had to be reviled still; the desire created by the nexus of U.S. empire, Orientalism, and capitalism did not allow for the equilibrium of power. Vivek Bald's scholarship on a group of Bengali Muslim peddlers working in the United States during the same time as Syrian peddlers shows this same process of desire and revulsion. Bald describes the peddlers as operating "on a thin edge between Indophilia and xenophobia."<sup>167</sup>

The racialization of the peddler in Riggs's play is typical of other popular portrayals of Syrian peddlers. The peddler is described in the stage directions as "a little wiry, swarthy Syrian...very acquisitive, very cunning...his beady little eyes sparkling professionally."<sup>168</sup> In production photographs from the Theatre Guild's 1931 staging of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Lee Strasberg, the actor playing the peddler, appears to be wearing dark eyeliner, facial hair, and makeup to darken his skin.<sup>169</sup> The eyeliner accentuates his "beady little eyes" and the styling of the facial hair invokes racist representations of Asian men. Here, the peddler is an Orientalist representation of West Asian immigrants. Although the peddler was being played by a well-known Ashkenazi Jewish actor, the stage makeup that was used was for turning the Ashkenazi into the Syrian.

Riggs's previous work highlighted his interest in Syrian peddlers in the United

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167. Bald, *Bengali Harlem*, 46.

168. Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," 34.

169. "Laurey's Bedroom Scene. L to R: June Walker (Laurey), Ruth Chorpensing (Ado Annie), Lee Strasberg (Peddler) and Helen Westley as Aunt Eller Murphy". (1931) <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?493070>

States and the fantasies and stereotypes of “the east” they brought with them to Native territories. Written in 1925, *Knives from Syria* also takes place near Claremore, Oklahoma, but about twenty years after the setting of *Green Grow the Lilacs*. As a one-act play, its characters and plot are not very expansive, but the central theme of “unattached” women in Oklahoma is the same. A woman and her daughter live alone and survive with the help of a farm hand. The daughter is betrothed to the farm hand, but becomes interested in a Syrian peddler (again, unnamed) who visits them frequently. The peddler has written to the daughter and expressed his interest in her; the mother is disgusted with the prospect and the daughter’s desire for the peddler (and the life associated with his work) grows. While the daughter is excited by the travel that marriage to a peddler would bring, the mother warns her that a Syrian peddler would beat her and that they wouldn’t have a place to live.<sup>170</sup> The climax of the story is when the peddler returns to town and shows the mother and daughter a collection of Syrian knives, among other merchandise. Fearing that the peddler was the perpetrator of a recent attack against their farmhand, the mother allows the daughter to marry the peddler. When the mother learns that the farmhand was attacked by someone else, she regrets her decision, as she has lost her daughter to a man she abhorred. However, her daughter is eager to leave what she feels is a boring life behind and vows never to return. That the play revolves around the daughter’s fascination with and desire for the peddler and the mother’s paranoia about the danger he poses underscores Riggs’s familiarity with Syrian peddlers, but also shows

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170. R. Lynn Riggs, “Knives from Syria,” *One Act Plays for Stage and Study* (New York: Samuel French, 1927).

how he conceived of Syrian men in Orientalist terms. Clearly, then, the specificity of the Syrian peddler was important to Riggs's creative vision of Indian Territory and Oklahoma.

*Oklahoma!* (1943)

While the scenes involving Riggs's peddler are replicated in the musical *Oklahoma!*, he does not appear in the play subsequently, nor is he mentioned in the dialogue. Rodgers and Hammerstein greatly expanded the role of the Syrian peddler, now the Persian Ali Hakim, for the musical. Ali enters the story in the same fashion — traveling with Ado Annie and stopping at the home of Aunt Eller and Laurey. Instead of taking place inside the home of Aunt Eller and Laurey, the scene takes place outside, in front of their house. As with Riggs's Syrian peddler, Ali's seductiveness is situated at the line between revulsion and excitement. Aunt Eller and Laurey are skeptical and exhibit repulsion toward him, but when he shows them what he has for sale, their abhorrence melts away. Rather than continuing to berate him, once Ali tells Aunt Eller about the lingerie from Paris he has for sale, she invites him inside the home for a meal. The peddler's seduction thus extends to his wares for sale; even those who are wary of the quality of his merchandise and the integrity of his sales pitch, like Aunt Eller, are eventually seduced into buying something.

Ali Hakim's associations with manipulation, comedy, seduction, and fantasy are solidified throughout the first act of *Oklahoma!* But the seductiveness of the peddler himself, and particularly his masculinity, is undercut in this version by several elements.

Ali's love interest, Ado Annie, is portrayed as a clueless flirt who would leave Ali behind if only she knew better. Importantly, in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Ado Annie is not supposed to be an attractive woman. The stage notes describe her as "an unattractive, stupid-looking farm girl."<sup>171</sup> Yet, in *Oklahoma!*, she is as attractive as the lead, Laurey. She still retains the cluelessness of Riggs's character, but the emphasis in the musical is more upon her sexual proclivities. She is portrayed as sexually open, dim-witted, and morally naive. In both versions of the character, Ado Annie is not a respectable woman: she is hypersexual and her sexuality is not aimed toward reproduction. Thus, one can infer that she is with Ali Hakim because, as her solo musical number suggests, she "cain't say no", rather than because of his charms or attractiveness as a mate. Additionally, when Ali greets Laurey and kisses up and down her arm, Laurey is affronted. She exhibits none of the "secret pleasure" in this flirtation that we glean from Riggs's stage notes. In the move from 1931 to 1943, the Syrian/Persian peddler has already lost some of his desirability.

Further, Ali's seductiveness is tempered by his role as the musical's comedian. An earlier version of the musical included lines that reflected the relationship of gender to Ali's racial difference from white settlers through certain comedic lines. In this version, Ali was to open the song, "Its a Scandal! Its a Outrage!," with the spoken lines: "Friends,/Out in the east,/Out in the east,/A woman's a slave./She is bought,/Rented or leased./Then she's taught/How to behave!"<sup>172</sup> In effect, these lyrics set Ali apart from the

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171. Riggs, "Green Grow the Lilacs," 34.

172. Carter, *Oklahoma!*, 100.

other men of Claremore, and invoke his relationship to patriarchal norms of “the east.” The specific use of enslavement, purchase, and “taught how to behave” in the lyrics invites images of the harem, well known to American audiences by the 1940s. This song is the only one that Ali sings, and it involves his unification with the male settlers. After Ali has ended up engaged to Ado Annie despite his desire to be single, the men lament together the growing independence of women and the diminishing freedom of men. Ali’s difference from “Americans” is thus established through various maneuvers that single out his gender, sexuality, and “culture” as distinct and deviant from those of the United States. The lines were cut from the final script, but a similar jab at “Middle Eastern” patriarchy ensues when Ali jokes about the number of wives Persian men have, calling his brother who has only one wife a “bachelor.”

In addition to playing the jester, that there are hints of sexual deviance in Ali’s seduction as well. In one of Ali’s scenes, he gives Ado Annie a “Persian goodbye” in front of her white settler fiancé, Will. The joke is that the “Persian goodbye” is a long, passionate kiss. Ali has been trying to convince Ado Annie that Will is the right husband for her, in order to avoid marrying her himself. As he sings Will’s praises, she asks him, “Do you love Will too?” And after Ali gives Ado Annie his “Persian goodbye,” he jokes that Will could be next. The suggestion of queerness in this joke undermines the masculinity of the peddler through highlighting Ali’s failure with women. In *Oklahoma!*, Ali’s fate is continually at the mercy of the women he seduces, or more accurately, at the mercy of their fathers. Ado Annie is convinced that because Ali wants “paradise” with

her upstairs at the Claremore hotel, it must mean that he wants to marry her.<sup>173</sup> In keeping with the cluelessness of her character, Ado Annie gladly tells her father the details of their courtship. For example, she says that Ali calls her his “Persian kitten” because the kittens, like Ado Annie, have “soft round tails.”<sup>174</sup> As a result, Annie’s father points his shotgun at Ali Hakim and forces him to agree to marry her. Although Ali is able to escape marriage to Ado Annie through routing her back into the arms of Will, he ends up being tricked into marriage later on with another woman, Gertie Cummings. Gertie is distinguished by her piercing, nervous laughter—a signal that she is not the most sought-after of the women in the community and also one that reflects on the peddler’s desirability. In an echo of Ali’s earlier misfortune, the union is arranged at gunpoint by Gertie’s father. In earlier drafts of *Oklahoma!*, another character was introduced to play opposite Ali: a Mexican woman named Lotta Gonzales who is described as “sexually active.”<sup>175</sup> While racialized differently than Ado Annie, Lotta Gonzales is also hypersexual and non-reproductive, thus underscoring Ali Hakim’s deviance in relation to the women in his life. In this version, Ali’s relationship with Lotta is solidified by the end of the play, a plot move which would have also solidified Ali’s brownness and blocked his assimilation into the white community. Both possible story lines involve the taming of women’s sexuality through marriage and, more broadly, the (impossible) disciplining of

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173. Rodgers, Richard and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma! A Musical Play* (London: Williamson Music, 1943), 26.

174. Ibid, 32.

175. Carter, *Oklahoma!*, 201.

desire, making desire and women's sexual and relationship choices a major concern of the plot.

The costuming and body language for Ali Hakim also indicates his deviation from normative masculinity, as evidenced in the production photographs from the original Broadway cast. In this photograph, Ali Hakim's gender and sexual difference are best seen in contrast to Ado Annie's virulent father, Andrew Carnes, and in contrast to Ado Annie as well.<sup>176</sup> The picture depicts the scene in which, after having found out about Ali's intentions with his daughter, Andrew is forcing Ali to marry her at gunpoint. On the level of apparel, Andrew's dark, monochromatic suit jacket, pants and boots denote an unambiguous masculinity, contrasted with Ado Annie's light-hued dress, tiers of fabric, and ruffles. Ali is also wearing a suit, but one that looks unlikely to ever get dirty. His clothing is "fancy," entirely patterned in plaid with a dark, ornamental piping along the edges of the suit jacket. Their body language mimics this contrast. Andrew's stance is wide-legged and he is pointing a shotgun in Ali's face. Ali's body is languid, approaching the shape of the letter "s." Ali, rather than holding a gun or another weapon, yields a walking stick. He is not bracing for a fight, but rather pointing, or perhaps wagging, his finger in Andrew's direction. Ali Hakim is clearly situated in between Ado Annie and Andrew Carnes in his gender presentation. While he is not portrayed as a woman, he is more closely associated with a dandy in his appearance, than with a farmer or a cowboy. His queer masculinity is inseparable from his placement in the community as an

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176. "Joseph Buloff (Ali Hakim), Celeste Holm (Ado Annie) and Ralph Riggs (Andrew Carnes) in Oklahoma!" (1943)  
<http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?1818322>

“Oriental” foreigner.

While scholars identify Ali Hakim’s stereotypical character with European Jewish peddlers, his racialization depends upon his orientalization—specifically the construction of his gendered and sexual deviance as emblematic of “Eastern” cultures. While both European Jewish and Syrian peddlers had reputations for manipulating or swindling their buyers into a sale, it was *Syrian* peddlers, and not European Jews, who carried the stigma of being *both* sexual predators and sexually backwards. Though somewhat contradictory, the sexual threat, along with the implied queer and backwards nature of that sexuality, was a distinct trait of Orientalism, namely in the stereotyping of “the East” as irrevocably and reducibly feminine. For instance, the circulation of ideas about “the harem” in Europe and the United States, suggested that West Asian men were both predatory and depraved. The same judgment of moral incompetency was applied to the seemingly permissive attitude of “Oriental” societies regarding same-sex desire. While Ashkenazi Jewish men were often stereotyped as inept men, these stereotypes did not have sexual implications. Orientalism is thus the primary lens through which the peddler is portrayed, both in Riggs’s play and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical. Despite the intention of Rodgers and Hammerstein to create a “thinly veiled” Ashkenazi Jewish character, the queerness of this figure—his simultaneous seductiveness, effeminacy, and failures with women—underscores instead the Orientalist and West Asian origins of the character. The threat of Ali Hakim as both a sexual predator and an effeminate deviant, as embodied in

the same individual, was enabled through Orientalist genealogies of cultural difference.<sup>177</sup>

*Oklahoma!* (1955)

Just one year after the end of the U.S. tour that concluded eleven years of performances since *Oklahoma!*'s debut on Broadway, the film version was made. Sticking closely to Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical play, very few changes were made to the script and musical numbers. While the first two iterations of the role of the peddler were played by notable Jewish actors (Lee Strasberg and Joseph Buloff, respectively), the 1955 film features a well-known non-Jewish actor, Eddie Albert. Albert was a character actor who played a range of leading and supporting roles. He was not associated with Jewishness or any particular "ethnic" characters. Scholars who have examined the transition from musical play to film assert that by the time the film was produced, the character was so well established that it was no longer necessary to make it overtly Jewish.<sup>178</sup> Thus, Ali Hakim's assimilation has already taken place for the film version. Ali is no longer effeminate, as in 1943. Nor is his appearance altered to make him look West Asian, as in 1931. Beyond his "Persian" designation, the only thing that differentiates Albert's Ali from the rest of the Claremore community is his profession as a peddler and his accent (which is not consistent). Ali's "ethnicity" in the film version functions as an accessory; for all intents and purposes, he is (has become) white.

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177. Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 62.

178. Kirle, "Reconciliation, Resolution," 265.

The publicity photograph for the movie retains some similarities to the musical production's peddler character. Namely, the patterned suit with dark trim bears resemblance to the one worn by Joseph Buloff. But Ali's body language is much more assertive in this picture, facing the camera head on. He is upright and his grin and upraised eyebrow (characteristic of Eddie Albert) hint at the mischief the character creates. One might guess that he is a flirt and a comic from the photograph. He is shown with Barbara Lawrence, who plays Gertie Cummings in the film. While Gertie's piecing laugh identifies her in the show as slightly less than desirable, the photograph highlights her normative beauty and femininity. There is no indication in this photograph of Ali Hakim's deviance in masculinity or sexuality, nor is there any indication of his deviation from whiteness. Additionally, the peddler's one musical number, "Its a Scandal! Its a Outrage![*sic*]", was cut from the film. This number highlights Ali's dissatisfaction with marriage and women's assertiveness. Although the queerness of Ali Hakim has been mitigated in the film version through the elimination of his effeminacy, the jokes of the "Persian goodbye" and his love for Will remain. He is also still portrayed as a sexual predator; in the beginning, rather than meeting Laurey inside or in front of her home, she is outside swimming in the nearby lake. Laurey scrambles to cover herself with a towel as Ali Hakim approaches and begins to remark at how grown up she is. As Ali kisses her hand and arm, Laurey is visibly affronted, recoiling and rebuffing Ali's advances. This difference from both Riggs's play and Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical play marks Ali Hakim as a clear womanizer. However, his sexuality is no longer intertwined with his supposed non-European origin. As his race is whitened, his gender and sexuality are

whitened, or normalized, as well. These three portrayals of the West Asian peddler illuminate the different anxieties surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and labor in the first half of the twentieth century. In the next section, I further define these three different portrayals, examine the relationship these portrayals had to the United States as a settler colonial and imperial power, and generate the implications this held for early Arab American racialization. I begin with the context of transient labor and sexuality in the United States and then examine what the material reality of life in Indian Territory/Oklahoma was like during these three cultural moments.

#### TRANSCIENCE, SEXUALITY, AND SETTLEMENT

Beginning in the 1870s, workers in the United States began to travel longer distances in order to find employment. “Tramps” were homeless and mobile people, mainly men, later to be called “migrants” or “migrant laborers.”<sup>179</sup> From the 1870s through World War II, there was increasing concern about these mobile populations, with public panic spiking in the 1880s and 1890s, during the Great Depression, and during World War II. These concerns centered upon questions of mobility, migration, and lack of connectedness to a geophysical community, but they were also linked to sexual practices that deviated from a narrowly-defined heterosexual norm. In the first half of the twentieth century, the U.S. state exhibited growing hostility toward these practices and

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179. Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10.

began to incorporate newly formed ideas about homosexuality into federal law.<sup>180</sup> Transients were targeted by police, immigration law, and restrictions on voting and owning property.<sup>181</sup> As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, for women this focused on “deviant heterosexuality” as seen through gendered transgressions<sup>182</sup> in public spaces, work, marriage, and motherhood. On the other hand, sexual encounters between men were at the center of panic about “bums,” “hobos,” “tramps,” and other transients. At the end of the 1920s, a period in U.S. history characterized by wealth and excess, a financial crisis was eminent. As the economy took a downward turn with the Great Depression and more government programs were created to assist those in need, public anxieties about work, poverty, race, and sexuality soared. The associations between transience and homosexuality for men “adrift” from their families created a national panic along racial lines. As non-white masculinity was always already deviant, it was white masculinity and sexuality that was often articulated as being at risk in these anxieties. This applied to both same-sex encounters between white men and interracial encounters involving white and non-white men.<sup>183</sup> Whereas after World War II there was a clear articulation of heterosexuality and homosexuality as sexual categories, before World War II this sexual binary was expressed in terms of “mobility” and “settlement.”<sup>184</sup> As Syrians were so

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180. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 2.

181. Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 2.

182. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 12.

183. Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*.

184. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 134.

closely associated with peddling and were situated racially in between “white,” “Asian,” and “black,” the anxieties expressed about transience, race, and sexuality put Syrians in a perilous state. By taking into consideration this national panic that spanned nearly eight decades of U.S. history, we can understand how the anxieties surrounding the Syrian and West Asian peddler changed from Riggs’s 1929 play to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1943 musical and to the 1955 film.

On the “frontier,” Syrian peddlers inhabited contradictory positions: their economic services were needed but their racial and cultural difference, seen as a gender/sexual queerness, was threatening to normative American national identity. If the queerness of the peddler was a barrier to the early Syrian immigrant’s integration into white settler societies, then forcing the peddler to assimilate through his sexual and economic practices would ostensibly allow him this access. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* illustrates this resolution, which is perhaps its most significant deviation from Riggs’s *Green Grow the Lilacs*, where the peddler is concerned. While in Riggs’s play the peddler does not appear after the first two scenes, in *Oklahoma!* Ali Hakim’s flirtation with settler women continues. Ali evades marriage to Ado Annie, only to find himself trapped in a commitment to Gertie Cummings by the end of the show. Once she announces her marriage to him, Gertie explains: “Ali ain’t goin’ to travel around the country no more. I decided he orta settle down in Bushyhead and run Papa’s store.”<sup>185</sup> The settling here is literal, meaning that Ali must now ‘stay put’, living and working in

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185. Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Oklahoma!*, 78.

the local community, rather than coming and going as he pleases. Reflecting the anxieties about transient male laborers and homosexuality during this time period, the settling indicated here is also about Ali's life as a bachelor and womanizer. Margot Canaday notes that, in the context of the national panic regarding migratory populations after the Great Depression, "the literal cessation of movement was only a precondition for settling down, which implied not only steady employment and property ownership, but marriage and reproduction as well."<sup>186</sup> Finally, the settling is also about the transition from "Indian Territory" to "Oklahoma," wherein the peddler is being compelled into a different kind of participation in U.S. settler colonialism.

This resolution describes a process of assimilation and whitening for the male West Asian peddler: through his profession and business practices, his mobility and residence, and his sexuality. While Andrea Most argues that Ali Hakim represented "Jews' hopes of moving into white America" through assimilation, we need to understand what was happening in the land of Oklahoma in order to understand assimilation in *Oklahoma!*.<sup>187</sup> In this section, I argue that Syrian peddlers, like Ali Hakim, were not only aberrant due to their nomadic lives and the association of nomadism with deviant sexual practices, but also because of their relationship to the land. Examining this relationship helps put the racialization of Syrian peddlers and their gendered and sexual subjectivities in context with U.S. settler colonialism.

In the setting of Riggs's *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the fact of the Syrian peddler's

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186. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 98.

187. Most, "We Know We Belong to the Land," 86.

disappearance from the plot is significant. Although Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical depicts a fairly homogeneous, Euro-American settler community, other scholars have shown how the Indian Territory setting was drastically different in its actual demographics. David Chang's research on nation, race, and landownership centers upon Oklahoma in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries precisely for its racial diversity. The story of Oklahoma is the story of a "violent transformation" of native, African American, and white settler relationships to the land, as all three groups had significant presences in both Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1920s.<sup>188</sup> The dispossession of native land was central to these relationships for native, African American, and white settlers. The native tribes that were in the "Oklahoma" area when Europeans first arrived were displaced after the Indian Removal Act of 1830, as the United States government forced tribes in the southeastern United States to relocate in an ever-diminishing area of land designated as "Indian Territory." The Choctaws, Chicasaws, Creeks, Cherokees, and Seminoles were forcibly resettled in this area that would become Oklahoma, during the event that is commonly known as "The Trail of Tears." African Americans came to this area in multiple ways: some escaped slavery in the south and found homes with native tribes, others were enslaved by natives, and still others came upon emancipation with hopes of owning land and starting new lives. White settlers called "boomers" came to this area illegally starting after the Civil War, when native tribes who sided with the Confederacy were forced to

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188. David Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Land Ownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 6.

cede land to the U.S. government.<sup>189</sup> Boomers attempted to steal, lease, or otherwise occupy native lands in this region. In 1890, the U.S. government deemed these lands Oklahoma Territory, which was on the western border of Indian Territory, and opened it for homesteading by settlers.

The story of *Oklahoma!* not only erases this landscape but also erases the likelihood that Riggs's characters were themselves native.<sup>190</sup> Chang suggests that white settlers in Oklahoma were more concerned with Indian and Black claims on the land than a small immigrant population and questions of their whiteness.<sup>191</sup> This insignificance is mirrored in Riggs' play, where the Syrian peddler is irrelevant after two scenes. This insignificance could also be explained through the social location of the author. Both the time when the play was written (the late 1920s) and the relationship of the author to the land of the play (Riggs was Cherokee and grew up in the relocated Cherokee Nation) would suggest that this play is haunted by the land loss and genocide of the indigenous population of Turtle Island. Clearly, Syrian peddlers were significant enough to Riggs to include them in two of his works. Still, they were not the focus of his creative vision. If we also consider Jace Weaver's assertion that Riggs's play was about Cherokees rather than white settlers,<sup>192</sup> then forcing the assimilation of a Syrian peddler to settle the land

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189. Ibid, 76.

190. Ibid, 99.

191. Ibid, 191.

192. Jace Waver, "Assimilation, Apocalypticism, and Reform (1900-1967)," *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 99.

that Cherokees were struggling to maintain does not make sense.

Chang's scholarship on landownership and race in the Creek nation shows that Creeks (in addition to other indigenous tribes) were characterized as backwards by the U.S. settler colonial state because of their communal and matrilineal relationship to their lands.<sup>193</sup> During the period of allotment, beginning with the Dawes act of 1887, a segment of U.S. politicians and reformers sought to turn native people into "Americans" by changing their relationship to the land. Allotment divided communal lands of native tribes and assigned a plot to each Indian household through private property ownership. This particular form of landownership, it was believed, would "work a slow alchemy of racial transformation" wherein Indians would "learn the whitening culture of capitalism" and thus disappear *as Indians*.<sup>194</sup> Simultaneously, a more literal whitening was occurring, as white male settlers began to marry native women, in part, to be able to own native lands through the children they produced together.<sup>195</sup> In contrast, the labor of African Americans, as a racially distinct population, enabled the United States to accumulate mass capital. Their whitening would have been detrimental to U.S. capitalism and the state. The difference in this racialization lay in their relationship to land and capital and what they brought to the U.S. settler colonial project and burgeoning empire. Whereas the "whitening" of Indians also weakened their sovereignty, the inclusion of Blacks in the U.S. citizenry, as Patrick Wolfe puts it, "would not add millions of acres to the national

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193. Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 110.

194. *Ibid*, 112.

195. *Ibid*.

estate.”<sup>196</sup>

While African Americans’ relationship to the land was characterized as “landlessness,” for native tribes, their communal and non-proprietary land practices were a barrier to the continuing acquisition of North America through settler colonialism. Once Indians owned their land as individuals, according to the European tradition, that land could be sold to settlers. The racialization of Black Americans, by contrast, was tied to their “landlessness” and to their status as enslaved (or previously enslaved) labor. Both things made them less than human in the U.S. legal system and in the national imaginary. But U.S. settler colonialism depended (and depends still) upon their labor, whereas the erasure of native people is necessary for the United States to exist. Thus, the assimilation of native people through the enforcement of a different relationship to the land was essential to U.S. settler colonialism.

Chang describes how white settlers who came to Indian Territory saw themselves as would-be yeomen, entitled to producing a life from the land and owning the land that they worked.<sup>197</sup> Their whiteness was the key to this entitlement. But when many of these poor, white settlers became tenant farmers, rather than landowners, this sense of entitlement fueled the white radicalism of both the labor struggles and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the early decades of twentieth century Oklahoma.<sup>198</sup> The concept of

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196. Patrick Wolfe, “Race and the Trace of History,” *Studies in Settler Colonialism: Politics, Identity, and Culture*, Eds. Fiona Batemen and Lionel Pilkington (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 279.

197. Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 129.

198. *Ibid*, 189.

settlement encompassed not only staying put, but also property ownership with business practices tied to that property (i.e. farming or running a store), and, significantly, heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Syrian peddlers were economically useful in this setting, providing goods to settlers in spaces where they were not easily accessible. In this context, Syrian peddlers, as racially ambiguous members of the Oklahoma and Indian Territory landscapes, were not especially urgent sites for white national investment. Their economic usefulness outweighed the threat they posed to white supremacy. Despite this mixture of usefulness and racial insignificance, the transient practices of peddling, and particularly their lack of relationship to the land, were *unsettling*. This describes their “in-between” racial position — their small numbers, in addition to the uncertainty regarding their race, shielded them from a certain amount of white supremacist targeting. But they were not clearly white, or not white enough, to exempt them completely from racialized violence. The anxieties about Syrian male peddlers show their transgression of each of these elements.

Syrians had a documented presence in what would later become the state of Oklahoma as early as 1874, although they did not appear on census records until 1900.<sup>199</sup> Because the earliest documentation was the birth of a child to Syrian parents, it is likely that Syrians were in the region even before this date. Many of the earliest presences were Syrians who came to work as coal miners in the Choctaw nation, though census records show that they did not stay miners for long. While the 1900 census records show a high

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199. Tom Joe Caldwell, “The Syrian-Lebanese in Oklahoma” (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1984), 39, 33.

percentage of Syrians in Oklahoma were miners, by 1910 most had moved on from mining to peddling.<sup>200</sup> It is important to note, however, that census records cannot be taken as complete or even accurate pictures of the community. Transient laborers, such as peddlers, were easy to miss in census work and Syrians were often erroneously categorized, making them that much harder to track. In 1907, an article in *The Guthrie Daily Leader* expressed concerns about a recent influx of immigrant laborers to Oklahoma coal mines. The newspaper lamented that these immigrants came to “get their fingers on a few good Oklahoma dollars” and then return to their native countries. Italians and Syrians were named especially as immigrants that were notorious for being contract laborers and for having no intention of seeking U.S. citizenship and assimilating.<sup>201</sup> Syrian peddlers in this region found themselves in the crossfire of settler social norms. In 1903, the same newspaper reported that a Syrian peddler had attempted to assault one of his female customers. Rashed Saliney, a Syrian jewelry peddler, visited the home of customer Mrs. Effie Witt in Mills County, where he “attempted the assault.” Saliney was detained and charged with attempted assault in nearby Greer County; police decided to hold him there, as they feared he “would be lynched” if he were to be returned to the site of the alleged crime.<sup>202</sup> The fear of a lynching points to the racialized

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200. Ibid, 40. Caldwell's research shows that within a span of ten years, miners moved overwhelmingly to the occupation of peddling.

201. “Italian and Syrian Emigrants,” *The Guthrie Daily Leader*. January 8, 1907. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063952/1907-01-08/ed-1/seq-4/>

202. “Special to Daily Leader,” *The Guthrie Daily Leader*. August 6, 1903. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063952/1903-08-06/ed-1/seq-6/>

perception of Syrians and the threat of miscegenation that male Syrians peddlers posed to their white female customers. The veracity of the allegation is unclear. Of course, Saliney could have attempted to assault his customer. But equally as plausible, considering the rampant accusations of rape of white women that implicated men of color during the early twentieth century, is a scenario in which the customer felt threatened simply by the Syrian peddler's presence. Another instance in 1911 is an example of the "vigilante justice" exacted upon peddlers when customers were not happy with their transaction. Cabel Cory, a Syrian peddler, was violently assaulted by two men after Cory argued with the wife of one of the men over payment for a sale. The two men tracked the peddler down after he had left the customer's home and "almost beat him senseless" with the butts of their rifles.<sup>203</sup> Finally, in 1909, the editors of *The Beaver Herald* urged their readers not to buy from peddlers. After speaking with two Syrian peddlers who told them that business had not been good of late, the editors asserted that "our people" have merchants that already serve the community well. "Stick to your town and her business people," they proclaimed, "they are the fellows who stick to you. The others 'stick it' to you."<sup>204</sup> Clearly, Syrian peddlers were not included in "our people." Each of these occurrences of Syrians in the press highlights the anxieties white settlers had about Syrians' sexual corruption, lack of desire in becoming U.S. citizens, and transience. They demonstrate the vulnerability of Syrian men as peddlers, in contrast to the threats they

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203. "Two Sent to Jail; Assault is Charged," *Tulsa Daily World*. May 26, 1911. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042344/1911-05-26/ed-1/seq-5/>

204. Editorial. *The Beaver Herald*. March 18, 1909. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn93066071/1909-03-18/ed-1/seq-8/>

were supposed to be to white women.

When Syrians became or attempted to become landowners, however, they also became specific targets of white supremacy. Just as in Oklahoma, Syrians first came to several locales in Nebraska as mining grew in the region. Between 1897 and 1907, seven Syrian families owned land in or near Kearney, Nebraska. But Aaron Jesch's research on the Kearney community shows that Syrians were frequently referred to by racial slurs and were "blamed for vices, and for taking jobs and land from Americans."<sup>205</sup> One Syrian American of Kearney remembered that Syrians were specifically blamed for taking land under the Homestead Act: "people were upset to see these dark-skinned immigrants, who could barely speak English, accumulating land, and building businesses when Europeans immigrants were struggling." This sentiment persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>206</sup> The most violent event in the Kearney Syrian community occurred as a result of white supremacist attitudes toward Arabs. In 1927, a group of white Kearney "boys" attacked a group of Syrians who were celebrating a baptism and a birthday. Later that night the white boys returned "with reinforcements of fifty to seventy-five people" and at the end of the brawl, many people were wounded and one Syrian man had been shot and died.<sup>207</sup>

Back in Oklahoma, in 1899, *The Guthrie Daily Leader* announced the presence of

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205. Aaron D. Jesch, "A Peddler's Progress: Assimilation and Americanization in Kearney, Nebraska, 1890-1924" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 2008), 53.

206. *Ibid*, 53-55.

207. *Ibid*, 57.

a “colony of Syrians” in Woods County, stating that the Syrians were “delighted with their location.”<sup>208</sup> Woods County was located in Oklahoma Territory, which was opened for homesteading in 1890, after years of white settler agitation to claim the land. The Syrians mentioned in this article consisted of seven families who farmed land on seven adjoining farms south of Alva, Oklahoma. At the time of the article, the families had already applied for an established a U.S. post office, named “Syria,” which remained open until 1907. Just a month after the announcement of the Syrian colony was published, these families appeared again in *The Guthrie Daily Leader*. This time, the reason was over a dispute with a neighboring Anglo-American family. The Syrians’ cattle had wandered into the corn fields of the Anglo neighbors, and those neighbors had demanded compensation for destroyed crops. The article did not report details but sadly, the dispute ended violently when one of the Syrians “got the top of his head caved in with a hammer while his brother got his face frescoed with a hammer and a fence post.”<sup>209</sup> Land, then, was central to the development of a racialized subjectivity under settler colonialism. To the extent that Syrians avoided or were not able to access landownership, they also remained less important targets for white supremacist violence in relation to others—although they were certainly not exempt from it. In cases where they did own land, like in Kearney, Nebraska and Woods County, Oklahoma, their visibility as competitors for white entitlement increased.

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208. *The Guthrie Daily Leader*. July 14, 1899.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063952/1899-07-14/ed-1/seq-2/>

209. *The Guthrie Daily Leader*. August 29, 1899.  
<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063952/1899-08-29/ed-1/seq-1/>

It may seem curious that Riggs's play displays none of these anxieties about land or citizenship. However, these were *white, nativist* anxieties and Riggs was more oriented toward telling the stories of his childhood home. This may also lend more evidence to Jace Weaver's argument that Riggs's play was about the concerns of Indians in what was about to become the state of Oklahoma—not the concerns of white settlers. In contrast to the demographic reality of Indian Territory at the turn of the century and the indigenous subjectivity of Lynn Riggs, Rodgers and Hammerstein emptied the geography of *Oklahoma!* to make it “the vacant landscape of the myths of dominance.”<sup>210</sup> Both the time and the authorship of *Oklahoma!* illuminate the reasons for the differences between it and Riggs's play where the peddler is concerned. While Riggs's wrote during the Great Depression, based the peddler character on a real person from his childhood, and was influenced by his indigeneity, Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote during World War II and were influenced by their immigrant-settler and Jewish heritages. In 1943, the United States was at war: ideas of American unity, the persecution of Jews under Nazism, and potential expansion of the American empire were all important elements that figured in popular culture. Rodgers and Hammerstein were two of a number of Jewish artists who were at the helm of American musical theater in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Andrea Most argues that theater during this time period was the primary venue in which Jews could articulate their vision of America and carefully insert themselves “as accepted members of the white American community.”<sup>211</sup> Most also notes that the settling of Ali Hakim may

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210. Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, 99.

211. Most, ““We Know We Belong to the Land,”” 77.

have also had to do with the impact of Zionism on the authors, in which a utopic Jewish state was being presented as a place where Jews could “return to the soil, become farmers, and claim the land as their own.”<sup>212</sup> Additionally, when *Oklahoma!* was created, the United States had not yet recovered from the “roving army” of men looking for work during and after the Depression and its association with perversion. If anything, the anxieties surrounding hobos and tramps grew into a full-fledged panic about homosexuality during World War II, as the number of veterans in transient populations grew. Officials feared that these numbers would skyrocket after the war, allowing for increased roaming of the “unattached” and the abandonment of familial responsibilities.<sup>213</sup> The GI bill was created for this purpose, for “settling men down after wartime.” In this legislation, the first prohibitions against homosexuality also appeared, with the “vague opposition between mobility and settlement hardening in a clear line between homosexuality and heterosexuality.”<sup>214</sup> The uneasy humor about the peddler’s potential for queerness, as well as his unrestrained flirtatiousness with women, fit into this rubric of national panic. *Oklahoma!* both spoke to this anxiety in American audiences and appeased them by heterosexualizing and domesticating all elements of sexual deviance in the story, all the while reaffirming American superiority. Although the time when Riggs wrote was also a time of concern regarding transience, Riggs did not seem to

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212. Ibid, 81.

213. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 134.

214. Ibid, 137-138.

share the preoccupation with homosexual panic.<sup>215</sup>

By 1955, when the film version of *Oklahoma!* was produced, the United States was in the midst of an economic boom, a markedly conservative political climate, the Cold War wrestling match between capitalist and communist world views, and the start of the Civil Rights Movement. Musical films were one of the most popular genres and Westerns were also experiencing a revival in film and television. *Oklahoma!* captured both of those elements, in its form as a musical, and in the “frontier nostalgia” of its plot. The demographic revisions to Oklahoma’s landscape, the whitening of Ali Hakim (read as an Ashkenazi Jew), and the eradication of his queerness were all elements congruent with 1950s culture. In effect, the peddler, and by extension Arabs and West Asians, were placed in different relationships to U.S. settler colonialism and empire in the play, the musical, and the film. In 1931, the Syrian peddler was emphasized as a provider of conveniences, necessities, and exotic fantasies—a figure of whimsy but insignificant overall. This portrayal emphasized the importance of “the Orient” and of “Orientals” in the development of U.S. consumerism and white, middle class female identity. In 1943, the peddler embodied the crisis in sexuality of migrant men, as well as the exotic seduction and dangerous corruption of Asian immigrants. By 1955, the peddler had become part of the nostalgia of the “frontier” he traveled, although his queer and West

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215. I find it important to note that Riggs was homosexual, as this has been ignored by other scholars. However, the relationship of Riggs’s sexuality to *Oklahoma!* is beyond the scope of my project. For more discussion of Riggs’s sexuality, see Craig S. Womack, “Lynn Riggs as Code Talker: Toward a Queer Oklahomo Theory and the Radicalization of Native American Studies,” *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Asian origins could not be completely eradicated. Representations of Syrian male peddlers centered upon the threat of their gendered, sexual, and racial difference that was brought to the doorsteps of “vulnerable” white women. These portrayals contrasted with the ways in which their female counterparts were understood. For Syrian women peddlers, the root of their transgressions began inside the home, where they were understood as failed mothers and wives who needed to be reformed.

### Chapter 3

#### **“From Peddling it is Only a Step to Begging”: Syrian Immigrants and Social Welfare**

In May of 1925, the family of Nazha and Salem Said and their seven children were visited by a social worker. Victoria Karam, the “Syrian Secretary” of the International Institute of Boston, was told by a social worker from another agency that Mr. And Mrs. Said were having difficulties with their eldest son, George, and needed an interpreter in order to place him in a juvenile institution.<sup>216</sup> Upon visitation, Ms. Karam learned that Mr. Said did not get along well with one of Mrs. Said’s sons, George.<sup>217</sup> This was a “blended” family: Nazha Said, a Protestant, and Salem Said, a Druze, were both married previously and each had children in those marriages. This case file chronicles the contact between the International Institute of Boston and the Said family from 1925 through 1935, and what begins as an issue of father-stepson strife, as far as the case file narrative is concerned, continues into many other difficulties. As the family’s life comes under the gaze of the social welfare agency, the parents’ marriage and parenting styles, their work habits, the behavior of the children, and their overall home life all become

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216. For more information on International Institutes, see Raymond Mohl, “Cultural Pluralism in Immigrant Education: The International Institutes of Boston, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, 1920-1940,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 1, 2 (1982), 35-58.

217. The names of the family have been changed. The guidelines for using the case files of the International Institutes require anonymity be protected. Victoria Karam is the real name of the social worker.

areas for regulation and discipline. Within the 10 year period that the Said family is in contact with the International Institute of Boston, members of the family experience unemployment, physical and sexual abuse, the births of two children and the deaths of two children, illness, changes in residences and the death of Mr. Said.<sup>218</sup> The 29 type-written pages of case notes and the correspondence between social work agencies regarding the Said family also shows how the family's interactions with the International Institute are embedded in a larger context of accessing social welfare services and networking between social workers in the Boston area. On the back of the case file intake form, there is a list of dates and names of other agencies accessed: "6-10-25 SSE, 5/24-21 State Temporary Aid...2/11/22 S.P.C.C....2/25/26 Children's Aid Ass'n., 12/2/19 Industrial Aid Society."<sup>219</sup> These notations were not merely "for record"; they provided information on how much or little the family used social welfare services and also enabled social workers to share information about particular families across agencies. Social workers not only talked to the families for information, but also talked to each other across agencies. And in this instance, where the adults in the family did not speak English and the International Institute social worker spoke both English and Arabic, Victoria Karam provided a good deal of information to other social welfare parties who

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218. By looking at the case files of the other agencies with which the Sais interacted, I could likely substantiate, refute, or complicate many of these events that were chronicled in their International Institute case file. However, for now I am limited to this agency. I will be looking into these other agencies for the development of this chapter in the book project.

219. The International Institute of Boston, Massachusetts Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Box 13, Folder 256.

were unable to gain the same level of access to the Said family's lives. This and many other cases of poor Syrian families demonstrate how understandings of gender, class, work and sexuality were integral to the "uplift" of Syrian immigrants and, relatedly, how Syrian women and their families were pathologized in ways relating to their labor, sexuality, and cultural differences. The Said family were not peddlers themselves, but they were linked to the peddling economy, particularly through the boarding house that they owned and operated. As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, boarding houses were a loaded site of pathologization, violence, and policing.

Agencies of social welfare were a venue through which poor and working class Syrians sought assistance with employment, health and medicine, money, and in some cases, issues more centrally related to immigrant needs, such as English language classes, naturalization, and family reunification. At places like the International Institute of Boston, case files show hundreds of Syrians who came to the agency's offices for aid or who received visits from social workers regarding domestic struggles (abandonment or neglect by the husband, physical abuse, sexual abuse, etc.), the need for child care, or financial assistance. Others attended language and "Americanization" classes or sought help to bring other family members over to the United States. The archives of social work organizations and periodicals are one set of sources where records on poor and working class Syrian immigrants can be located, in contrast to community and family-based Arab American archives, where the written and physical record is often carefully selected to include only the materials that are deemed most respectable. As discussed in the introduction, the early Arab American community has left behind a rich archival

legacy through family and organizational papers, as well as a prolific Arab American press and the literary works of the well-known Pen League authors, through which certain histories of this community can be crafted. But these histories often obscure the lives of those Syrians who did not or were not able to climb the social ladder.

Syrian women and children especially appear in the pages of social welfare records, for several reasons, in contrast to representations in popular culture (see chapter 2). First, many of these agencies were primarily concerned with women and children as a rule and thus sought contact with women and children from various communities. In some cases, social workers would not aid a particular family without first seeing the woman of household.<sup>220</sup> Even more generally, women and children appear more frequently in social work archives than men, whether it be social workers themselves, who were overwhelmingly middle-class women, or those whom social workers sought to help. Second, Syrian men who peddled would have been away from home for longer periods of time, and thus women were more likely the ones seeking aid for their families. Women peddlers usually stayed closer to home.<sup>221</sup> Finally, it was more threatening for a Syrian man's honor to seek aid from what was often a *female* social worker than it was for a Syrian woman.<sup>222</sup> The appearance of children in social welfare commentary was

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220. Karen Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls and Immoral Women: Case Records and the Professionalization of Social Work* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 112.

221. Naff, *Becoming American*, 144. Naff notes that an absence of 6 months to a year, as well as longer trips back to Greater Syria, was not uncommon for long-distance peddlers, who were largely men.

222. Khater, *Inventing Home*, 87.

always an indictment of the parents, and specifically their mothers. Thus, the social welfare commentary surrounding Syrian communities and peddling produced damaging discourses about Syrian women and their femininity.

While some outside the Syrian community saw virtues in the Syrian peddler, as social workers they were few in number. Many in the various fields of social welfare derided peddling as a dishonest and lazy form of work, painting Syrian men as manipulative, Syrian women as pitiful and unruly, and Syrian children as endangered and dangerous. Peddling was not something that could be done in isolation. At the very least, it took support from a supplier in order to have items to sell. More often than not, peddling was an enterprise that also needed support from other peddlers for safety on the road and to avoid competition quarrels, as well as support from family members who did not peddle to take care of children and the elderly at home, and family members who made lace or other items for peddlers to sell. So on the one hand while a degree of disconnect from the community was possible while peddling, more often than not it was a very interdependent system of work. Precisely because this system exceeded the bounds and work roles of the American nuclear family, it attracted the gaze of the state. Thus peddling was embedded in a web of social welfare scrutiny of Syrians' homes, boarding houses, parenting practices, intimate relationships, and larger support networks that enabled peddling as a sustainable profession.

As this chapter will show, social welfare reformers saw peddling as an implicit danger to the family—one that allowed for men to abandon their familial duties, for women to neglect their children, and for children to be exposed to the moral and physical

dangers of the streets. The scrutiny from charity and social workers about peddling among Syrians—and particularly among Syrian women—was at once a concern about female gender and sexual normalcy, the racial classifications of West Asian immigrants and their assimilability, the policing of public space, and the encountering of poor and working class immigrants who lacked (or seemed to lack) the aspiration to a middle class, sedentary professional life. Thus, the adaptability of Syrian women to the norms that social workers articulated for them correlated directly to their fitness for U.S. citizenship, a privileged category that was predicated upon racial and gendered standards. This pathologization created a precedent for the interrogation of Syrian racial and gender normativity, a legacy that continues to surface in contemporary terms through questions of “American-ness,” freedom, and democracy with regards to Arabs and Muslims.

#### SYRIANS AND THE SOCIAL WELFARE ARCHIVE

Social welfare agencies, in their archival legacy as well as in their power to shape public discourse regarding poverty, gender and citizenship, reveal a dynamic process with regard to how Syrian immigrants were understood. That is, social welfare records reflect the changing and often contradictory opinions held toward the Syrian community and reveal the mechanisms through which Syrians were disciplined into (or expelled from) the U.S. national body. Once Syrians began to appear in U.S. social welfare records, starting in the late 1880s, their living conditions, family structures, cultural markers of difference and similarity, and laboring practices became sites of scrutiny, in line with larger discourses questioning the place and assimilability of immigrants from

southern and eastern Europe and from across the Asian continent. Although U.S. citizenship was legally attained for Syrians in 1915 through an argument for whiteness, uncertainty about their qualifications for citizenship persisted. Thus, in social work records, we can see how Syrians' "degrees of undeserving or deserving" the privileges of Americanness remained in flux.<sup>223</sup>

As social welfare has been centrally concerned with class, it makes sense to look to this archive for information on how Syrians were understood via their work, specifically peddling. Daniel Walkowitz calls social workers "gatekeepers" who have "always been patrolling the boundaries of class."<sup>224</sup> But as other scholars have demonstrated, class concerns were articulated through many other arenas of "the social," revealing the intricate connections between concepts of class, citizenship, gender, race, sexuality, and ability.<sup>225</sup> It is no coincidence that the field of social work developed during the same period of Syrian (and many other groups') immigration to the United States. Social work's anxieties about the family were intimately connected to changing community demographics linked to industrialization, immigration, and the abolition of slavery. One subset of scholarship has shown how social welfare in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century functioned overwhelmingly as an area of a gender-based

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223. Aihwa Ong, *Buddha is Hiding: Refugees, Citizenship, and the New America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 11.

224. Daniel Walkowitz, *Working with Class: Social Workers and the Politics of Middle Class Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 10.

225. Nigel Parton, "Reconfiguring Child Welfare Practices," *Reading Foucault for Social Work*, Eds. Adrienne Chambon et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 109.

politics for middle class women reformers.<sup>226</sup> As immigration swelled in the second half of the nineteenth century, U.S. nativism developed its response to changing demographics through the notion of a “social geology of citizenship based on race.”<sup>227</sup> “Maternal practice” and reproduction were the locus of anxieties regarding the production and maintenance of the right kind of “Americans,” in which character came explicitly from lineage. And yet women reformers did not generally adhere to exclusionist politics, but rather advocated for the “race improvement,” or assimilation, of immigrants. Assimilation was thus deeply rooted in concepts of motherhood and was prioritized over immigrant exclusion for many reformers.<sup>228</sup>

The sources used in this chapter include proceedings and reports from charity organizations, articles from social work and philanthropy-focused periodicals, and case files from the International Institute of Boston. For this chapter, I looked at 51 case files concerning Syrian immigrants from the International Institutes of Boston and Minnesota, as well as issues from the widely-circulating social work periodical *The Survey*, the annual reports of the Associated Charities of Boston from 1899 to 1905, and proceedings from the National Conference of Social Work from 1890 to 1925. The International Institute case files spanned a period of 18 years, from 1924 to 1948. Rather than using

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226. Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Gwendolyn Mink, “The Lady and the Tramp: Gender, Race, and the Origins of the American Welfare State,” *Women, the State, and Welfare*, Ed. Linda Gordon (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls*.

227. Mink, “The Lady and the Tramp,” 93-94.

228. *Ibid*, 103.

them to substantiate aggregate quantitative claims, I focus on two case files from Boston for a closer look at how social welfare actors engaged with poor Syrian Americans' lives. The Syrian community in Boston was much smaller than its New York neighbor, but still sizeable enough as a community to attract the attention of social workers. In particular, the high number of Syrian women peddlers was of concern to Boston social workers, which I will discuss in detail.

“International Institutes” originally developed through the YWCA in the 1920s, in order to specifically address the needs of new immigrant populations. They often had “nationality secretaries”—a first or second generation American from an immigrant community who was bilingual and acted as both social worker and liaison to the community. There were International Institutes throughout urban areas in the United States and they eventually became separate from the YWCA, forming their own federation. International Institutes frequently held galas and pageants that celebrated the different national cultures of the immigrants they served, but they remained at their core organizations that sought to normalize and assimilate immigrants. These sites of celebration, rather than allowing for the maintenance of a liberatory difference, became sites of consumption for white, native-born Americans and sites of discipline for immigrants.

Each of the chapters in this dissertation represent different archives—Chapter 1 focused on an academic archive (of narratives of Arab American history), Chapter 2 focused on an archive of national popular culture (that of the making and circulation of the musical *Oklahoma!*) and in this chapter I examine a biopolitical archive which is

closely related to the state, comprising of the records of social welfare institutions. By this, I mean that social welfare archives of private institutions, while not state-produced archives themselves, represent state policies and interests, through the biopolitical regulation and discipline of human populations. Even the International Institutes, which began as independent offshoots of the YWCA, were helping the U.S. government to enforce federal immigration policy by the 1930s.<sup>229</sup> Historians of social welfare have demonstrated that state power is inherent in social work institutions in a number of ways: social workers are agents of the state; private relief agencies and workers “also labor in the shadow of the state” because of their reliance on public subsidies; social welfare institutions are examples of the diffusion of state power as “technologies of government”; and the state can be defined through its practices and through what its agents do, for example.<sup>230</sup> The power of the state is also made visible in the act of looking through archives. For social work institutions whose case files were kept, the boxes upon boxes of files that I encountered as I researched for this chapter were a testament to the enormous pathologization of immigrant and poor communities. These files, wherein details and documentation provided supposed evidence of delinquency, dependency, immorality and the like, are also evidence of the state’s structuring reach through philanthropic efforts.

This chapter functions as a reading of Syrian presences in social welfare history

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229. Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford University Press: 2010), 284. After the Tydings-McDuffie Act was passed in 1934, effectively excluding Filipinos from entering the United States, the International Institute of San Francisco aided the U.S. government in enforcing the policy.

230. Walkowitz, *Working with Class*, 19; Ong, *Buddha is Hiding*, 6.; Canaday, *The Straight State*, 5.

as marks of their racial “inbetweenness.” By looking at social welfare records as building blocks of a “state apparatus,” the simultaneity of gender, race, class and sexuality norms as powerful forces in this early period of Arab American racialization becomes visible.<sup>231</sup> As research on women and the professionalization of social work has shown, sources such as these tend to convey as much, if not more, information about social workers and the social work profession as they do about their subjects.<sup>232</sup> Thus, this chapter does not attempt to piece together a more accurate view of what life was like for Syrian peddlers, using social work archival material. While we can understand through these materials that life for Syrian migrants most likely included these kinds of contacts with reformers and social workers, taking the perspective of social work as the truth of those encounters would allow for that perspective to stand in for Syrian migrant experience. And because Arab American community archives have little to offer on this subject, the literal finding of Syrians in the social welfare archive is a decentralized process involving a good deal of guess work. In addition, the word “Syrian” could have referred to someone coming from the present-day geographies of Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan or Syria itself and “Syrians” were often misnamed as Turks or Assyrians. However, conducting the archival research for this chapter not only allowed me to assemble a small archive of Syrian migrant appearances in social welfare, but also to experience a moment of recognition about myself as a fourth-generation Lebanese American in relation to assimilation. I was

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231. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

232. Kunzel, *Fallen Women*; Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls*.

quickly skimming the tabs of social work case files that were organized by the last names of the immigrants those files concerned in the hopes that I would find Syrians there.

There were three categories of names that I noticed: 1) recognizably Arab surnames (like Khoury, Karam and Ayoub), 2) Arab surnames that blended easily as if they were Anglo ones (such as George and Thomas), and 3) names that hinted of Arab ancestry, because they had been anglicized. But I also pulled numerous files that signaled neither of these things to me, last names like Daniel, Simons, and Dyer. I just felt curious about those names and almost all of them were Syrian case files. With each guess that turned out to be a Syrian, I felt a strange affirmation—not of any expertise borne of academic training (that was what enabled me to recognize Arab and anglicized Arab names), but of knowledge of my own history, a knowledge that I have long denied that I have.

Assimilation is often associated with things like loss of culture and ignorance of one's heritage, and certainly the violence of assimilation in these and other ways should never be dismissed. But at the same time, it was the process of assimilation and the liminality of Arab American experience that created the knowledge I could use in this moment—that names are not always what they seem and that “Syrian” immigrants have often had a way of hiding in plain sight.

I look to these sources to better understand the structuring discourses about class, gender and sexual normativity, and racial difference that were brought to bear upon Syrian communities and that guided the agencies from which Syrian immigrants were often forced to seek support. In order to examine how social welfare read normalcy and/or deviance in Syrian bodies and lives, and specifically how these understandings

contributed to an “in between” racial ambiguity, I consider which lenses racialize Syrians at particular moments. *Dependency* and *the Oriental other* are the primary non-white racializing categories through which Syrians were interpellated in social welfare discourse. As a concept, dependency has shifted over time in order to frame who should be dependent and how, as well as who should receive state support and how those individuals (or populations) should be marked as worthy of that support. Specifically in the context of social reform of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, any kind of dependency was a stigmatized state for men and dependency for women and children followed their ideal relationship to men. Women were supposed to be dependent upon their husbands (but not upon state aid, unless the husband was deceased) and children were supposed to be dependent upon their parents (who should not be dependent upon state aid).<sup>233</sup> Race functioned as a further distinction in this process, wherein dependency was understood as the “natural” and essential state of non-white men, as evidenced by colonization and enslavement.<sup>234</sup> When social workers and others ascribed feminine traits to non-white and not-yet-white men, their essential, yet abnormal, dependency was re-inscribed.<sup>235</sup> The dividing line as to whether those “essential” qualities could be changed into virtuous American masculinity was of course racial, and Syrian men often found themselves hovering within its borders. Non-white women were doubly

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233. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Signs* 19, 2 (1994), 309-36.

234. *Ibid*, 317.

235. Mink, “The Lady and the Tramp,” 96.

categorized as dependent, but their color also intervened in their status as “woman,” as black feminist scholars have shown “woman” to be “an exclusive, policed, and specifically European gender formation.”<sup>236</sup> With regard to the “Oriental other,” I refer to Edward Said’s foundational theory of Orientalism: the practice of enumerating the “ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and...‘the Occident.’”<sup>237</sup> The practice is historical and citational in that articulations of Orientalist knowledge are repeated to give credence or expertise to Orientalist distinctions. The practice is generative and institutional through the process of “dealing with the Orient...by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it.”<sup>238</sup> In the examples that follow, I will demonstrate how “dependency” and “the Oriental other” functioned as racializing lenses through their associations with peddling in the Syrian community. In exploring these associations through social welfare inquiries into Syrian labor practices, I am also able to demonstrate the gendered and classed nature of these lenses.

#### RACE AND THE COLONIAL ORIGINS OF THE DEPENDENT CHILD

The children of poor families were always in danger of being deemed “dependent” by state agents. In 1899, the National Conference of Charities defined

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236. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsely, *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.

237. Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

238. *Ibid*, 3.

“dependent children” as “those dependent on the public, homeless, abandoned, begging, peddling, performing, cruelly treated, having vicious parents, etc.” and asserted that dependent children “may be committed to the guardianship of an individual, a society, or an institution, with power to dispose of by adoption or indenture.”<sup>239</sup> Peddling was explicitly named as a dependent act. In the 1902 National Conference of Charities, a discussion on dependent and delinquent children cited the Illinois state law’s definition, which added to the above criteria that a dependent child was also one “who is found living with vicious or disreputable persons, or whose home, by reason of neglect, cruelty, or depravity on the part of the parents, guardians, or other persons in whose care it may be, is an unfit place for such child...”<sup>240</sup> In the first definition, the list of qualities, without the use of “or” implied their analogy, and there was no distinction between peddling and begging. Children engaged in peddling activities were “neglected” and at risk of separation from their families via state institutional care or private foster care and possibly deportation if they were not U.S. citizens.<sup>241</sup> The second definition allowed for the child’s home environment to be used as reason for dependency, even if the child’s actions did not. Social welfare discourse used both aspects of these definitions to typify the aberrance of Syrian immigrant mothers and their families.

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239. “Proceedings. Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting,” Records of the National Conference of Charities (1899), 54.

240. “Proceedings. Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting,” Records of the National Conference of Charities (1902), 440.

241. The Immigration Act of 1882 granted the power to deport or deny entry to any immigrant who was “liable to become a public charge,” otherwise known as LPC.

The account of one adult from the Syrian immigrant community, who had peddled as a child, reveals the close association between peddling and child dependency. As a young girl, Elizabeth peddled with her father, and sometimes by herself. She was learning English more quickly than her parents and her father was often turned away from lodging at night when he was alone. With the young girl in tow, he was deemed pitiful and not a threat, granting him more access to buyers' homes. Elizabeth recalled that, one day, while she was peddling near her home by herself, she encountered two women who took pity on her. Rather than buying from her and sending her on her way, the women took her inside and fed her and then bought her a new outfit, insisting that she wear it. Elizabeth knew that she could not keep on nice clothes and continue to peddle—the image was part of what made a sale—so she went home and changed back into her regular clothes afterward. However, she ran into the two women again that day, and she made up a story that a man had hit her and taken her clothes. The women demanded that the girl take them to this man, who was a Syrian who spoke English. What ensued was a multi-lingual conversation between the confused Syrian man and the women in English on the one hand, and between the Syrian man and Elizabeth in Arabic on the other, as she explained to him what had happened and entreated him to play along.<sup>242</sup> While this particular incident did not appear to culminate in child removal or the invitation of social work surveillance upon Elizabeth's family, Elizabeth certainly met the conditions of a "dependent child": she was out on the streets without her parents or an adult relative, she was peddling, and her poverty was visible in her physical appearance.

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242. Naff, *Becoming American*, 176.

More research is needed to determine how often Syrian children were taken from their families as a result of the links between these definitions of dependency and peddling, but the overall climate of child welfare in this time period was fraught with contradiction. As the Progressive Era was a time of immense social change, ideas about and policy toward children were similarly in flux. The state struggled to reconcile its guiding principle of keeping a family intact, regardless of financial level, while also trying to protect children from parents they viewed as neglectful, abusive or immoral.<sup>243</sup> “Child saving” was a philanthropic endeavor of good intentions and dangerous motivations, sometimes “saving” a child from homelessness or a physically abusive familial situation, and at other times removing a child from an already stigmatized poor family that sought to support all of its members as best it could. Charles Loring Brace’s “orphan train movement” embodies the epitome of contradictions of child welfare. The “orphan trains” relocated more than 250,000 children to families in rural areas starting in the 1850s and ending in 1929. While couched in language of rescue and concern, the “orphan trains” were also a vehicle for anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish xenophobia, assimilating mainly Irish and Italian Catholic children (and some Eastern European Jewish children) into Protestant families, not all of whom were orphans to begin with. In response, some immigrant communities created their own social welfare associations to protect their children, who were not always orphans when they were taken west to be placed. Although the orphan train movement continued through 1930, increasingly

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243. Mary Ann Mason, *From Father's Property to Children's Rights: The History of Child Custody in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 86.

throughout the Progressive Era, states created funds for dependent children and needy families, to support keeping the family in tact. As charity work grew into a consciously professionalized field, modern reformers wanted to shift care from the private sector to the state, through a “coordinated network of diagnosis, referral, and treatment.”<sup>244</sup> However, both institutional placement of children and the use of private foster care increased greatly during the Progressive Era. Institutional capacity grew 112% between 1890 and 1923, or 44% in ratio to the number of juveniles placed. And yet, for private care, its growth was exponentially larger than the public sector. Professional reformers expressed a preference for less punitive means for correcting dependent and “wayward” children. Many private facilities were classified as “benevolent” and received the bulk of juveniles, while public institutions were often classified as “reformatories,” and more often received those children marked delinquent. Thus within this time, the sector of child welfare developed and expanded in ways that were often contradictory to its tenets.<sup>245</sup>

Although the most ubiquitous definitions of dependency included peddling, none of them singled out Syrian children in doing so. How is it, then, that Syrians could have been racialized as non-white through the discourse of child dependency? Child reformers often drew on racial and racist ideas linked to class, poverty and the immorality of lawless children. The idea of a “street Arab” (which did not signal a literal child of Arab

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244. John Sutton, “Bureaucrats and Entrepreneurs: Institutional Responses to Deviant Children, 1890-1920s,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95, 6 (1990), 1368.

245. *Ibid.*

origin) was already part of the discourse of dependency and delinquency by the turn of the century, and it provided a convenient link between the largely class-based dependency of child peddlers (and other street workers) and the race- and culture-based waywardness of Arabs.<sup>246</sup> The discourse of the “street Arab” was an existing racial script through which Syrian Americans could be rendered non-white as “Arab” or could be rehabilitated into whiteness.<sup>247</sup> The term “street Arab” originated in Britain, from Orientalist images of ungoverned and infantile Arabs of West Asia and North Africa, its use dating to the 1840s. One of the earliest recorded uses of the phrase “street Arab” was by Lord Shaftesbury, in a British parliamentary speech in 1848. He declared, “City Arabs...are like tribes of lawless freebooters, bound by no obligations, and utterly ignorant or utterly regardless of social duties.”<sup>248</sup>

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, “street Arabs” were a common figure in British philanthropic materials and Victorian novels that chronicled and sensationalized the plight of street children. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the term had become ubiquitous in U.S. reform parlance as well, thanks in part to Jacob Riis’s infamous *How the Other Half Lives*.<sup>249</sup> Riis brought widespread public attention to the plight of homeless and poor immigrant children through his iconic

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246. Berman, *American Arabesque*. Berman provides an important analysis of the “street Arab” and its relationship to the early Syrian American intelligentsia.

247. *Ibid*, 179.

248. Lydia Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare, and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 25.

249. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890).

photography and his essays. “Street Arabs” were pitiful and in danger, but most importantly they were dangerous themselves and posed a threat to society. The use of this term linked the perceived or actual independence of poor children from the familial unit to the imperial characterization of Arab backwardness, using adjectives like “wild” and “lawless,” as well as the imagery of the desert and “tribes.” The racialized metaphors likening them to “Arabs in the desert” served to distance them from English citizens and recast them as “domestic savages,” bringing the “colonial exotic home” to Britain. In some instances, the term “street Arabs” was not invoked as a metaphor, but denoted an explicit race separate from the English, and reformers also characterized “street Arab” culture as one that was antithetical to Christianity.<sup>250</sup> “Street Arabs” were almost exclusively boy children; girls on the streets were more often viewed as “waifs” or “little women,” who elicited more pity and less moral incitement. All of these figures stood in contrast to the “normal” child, shaped by Victorian middle-class ideals: a child should be innocent and naive to the world outside the family and school, a child should be under adult supervision, a child should not be engaged in labor, and so on.

In his 1884 publication, *Street Arabs and Gutter Snipes*, Geo. C. Needham explained what he saw as a global phenomenon of the “street Arab,” and defined its link to actual Arabs: “The ‘street Arab’ is a very Bedouin in the midst of the thronging city multitude, manifesting those selfsame traits which so uniquely distinguish the veritable

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250. Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 24-31; Anna Davin, Helen Corr, and Lynn Jamieson, “When is a Child Not a Child,” *Politics of Everyday Life: Continuity and Change in Work and the Family*, Eds. Helen Corr and Lynn Jamieson (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 37-61.

‘child of the desert.’”<sup>251</sup> Blurring the origin of this racial typology, Needham also claimed that an Arab could be recognized by his “irrepressible characteristics” rather than by physical appearance.<sup>252</sup> This allowed him to easily explain the use of “Arab” to describe children of non-Arab origin. Indeed, in his lengthy expository on the subject, Needham mentioned Chinese “Arabs,” Zulu “Arabs,” and Japanese “Arabs,” in addition to the (European) “street Arab” and its rural counterpart, the “country Arab.” Thus “Arab,” in Needham’s usage, was a racialized state that could override a European “race” or exist simultaneously in conjunction with another (Chinese, Zulu, Japanese...). This cast Arab racialization as distinctly different from African or Asian racialization, in the British context, and simultaneously implied that it was a malleable or transferable state.

In the United States, the term circulated with similar imagery, interchangeably with “dependent children,” “delinquent children,” and “street children.” Although the imperial relationship between the United States and West Asia/North Africa was less developed and of a different character than that of Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial and Orientalist origins of the term were explicit in its American social welfare usage and mimicked the melodrama of Victorian sensibilities. In one instance from the National Conference of Charities, Orientalist imagery of “the Holy Land” framed the author’s metaphor: “The society which snatches the little Arab from the street, and, by giving him home, shelter, protection, and guidance, makes him feel that the world is not all a desert, and its denizens not all Ishmaelites, is doing untold

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251. George C. Needham, *Street Arabs and Gutter Snipes* (Boston, 1884), 20.

252. *Ibid.*, 20.

good.”<sup>253</sup> Here, the distant images of the desert and “Ishmaelites” (a biblical term used to refer to Arabs) created the backdrop of an unruly and unforgiving Orient—the original home of the “street Arab.” In another instance, the “nature” or “training” of the “street Arab” was described as “the depraved slang and trickery of the street,” “the leader in all kinds of mischief” and one who was “morally color-blind.”<sup>254</sup> This kind of characterization mirrored discourse outside of social welfare of West Asians as lazy, deceitful, and untrustworthy (often phrased as “Oriental trickery” or “Oriental cunning”) and was linked essentially to racial typographies. An 1890 story on the New York Syrian community from *Harper’s Weekly* demonstrated these same types of Orientalist images:

Many of them [Syrians] have so much negro or negroid blood in their veins as to be as dark-complexioned as Malays or Cuban mestizoes... They are clever, genial, orderly, patient, and indefatigable, but ignorant, clannish, intolerant, fierce, and vengeful... The peddler, with a choice assortment from this worthless lot, sets out after fortune... His commercial system is simple, and essentially Asiatic. He asks ten times as much for his wares as he will in reality accept, and twenty times what they are worth. He employs importunity, eloquence, mendacity, sympathy, and even fear to secure a customer, but, to his credit be it said, rewards every purchaser with a gratitude and obeisance that would be dignity itself were it not for their suggestiveness of servility.<sup>255</sup>

This passage also demonstrated some of the differences between British and U.S. Orientalist understandings of race. Whereas British colonialism understood “Arabs” as a racial type different from Asian and African racial types, the racial coding of Syrians in

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253. “Proceedings. Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting,” Records of the National Conference of Charities (1899) 192.

254. “Proceedings. Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting,” Records of the National Conference of Charities, (1892), 402; Ibid, (1899), 258, 451.

255. “Our Arab Colony,” *Harper’s Weekly* (October 25, 1890), 835.

the U.S. context was linked with other established “types”: “negro,” “Asiatic,” “Malay,” and “Cuban mestizo.” This indicates both the ambiguous nature of Syrian racial status (not easily pinned down as one type, racially mixed, in proximity to many others) and as racialized *in relation to* other non-white communities. Needham’s use of “Arabs” in other racialized groups of people showed a similar use of racial flexibility, but the U.S. usage was more explicit. Thus, Syrians in the United States were not understood in their own racial category but became visibly non-white as they were compared and found to be similar to these other racialized groups. Additionally, the labor of the Syrian plays a central role in this racialization, wherein the representative “commercial system” (peddling) is described as “simple,” “Asiatic,” and defined by its dishonest ways: Arabs are liars who cannot be trusted, and the proof is in their peddling. Still for all of the degradation in the use of the term “street Arab”—in books, newspaper articles, and speeches by politicians and social welfare reformers—the “child savers” were primarily still concerned with “saving.” Thus, this “Arab” was “neither fully foreign nor fully irredeemable.”<sup>256</sup>

#### POLICING THE SYRIAN HOME, POLICING SYRIAN WOMEN

Syrian children who peddled on their own or with family members were categorized as “destitute,” “dependent,” or “street Arabs” and the families they came from were to blame. At the 1916 National Conference of Social Work (formerly the National Conference of Charities), a self-proclaimed “child saver” remarked, “You know

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256. Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans*, 25.

all too well the homes, the over-crowding, the late hours, the tea and coffee drinking, the peddling, the home industries, the home where both the parents go out to work or the mother to play bridge, the lack of proper discipline...”<sup>257</sup> At the annual conference of the same year, we are given a better idea of which families are in question. In a presentation on medical casework, one example of a twelve-year-old Syrian boy with a heart condition is given. The boy’s home life is deemed at odds with his rehabilitative needs: “A poor home in an overcrowded foreign neighborhood, a large family of children, the father dead, and the mother with little intelligence and no control over her family.” The boy is placed in a boarding home for children but soon after, “...the mother demands the return of the boy to the unhealthy, overcrowded, Syrian quarter, where he can again run wild on the streets.”<sup>258</sup> In the “wildness” of the streets is the haunting figure of the “street Arab”—in uncomfortable racialized proximity to Syrian children.

Syrian immigrant family structures, wherein multiple generations, some Syrian born and some American born, lived together in tightly quartered tenements, were thus cited as being at odds with modern childrearing methods and proper domestic space, and as reason for the dependency (potential or realized) of Syrian children. In a 1925 report on mental hygiene and the home, it is precisely this mix of generations and cultural contexts that troubles the social worker: “The interference of relatives is always detrimental to children and makes wise and consistent discipline impossible. The danger

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257. “Proceedings. Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting,” Records of the National Conference of Social Work (1915), 594.

258. Ibid, 54-55.

is particularly great in families of the European and Eastern races, where the custom is for the relatives to live together, and for the grandmother to be looked to as an authority on all matters pertaining to the children. The older generation resents the introduction of modern theories in regard to the upbringing of the children, and is inclined to scoff at ‘American ways.’” The speaker continues and gives as example a five-year-old Syrian boy, who lives with his American-born parents and his Syrian grandparents “holding to their old-world ideals and customs.” Given the fact that he is the only son and “will become the head of the household,” the grandparents want to pamper the boy, while the parents would like to use some discipline. As a result, according to the social worker, the boy learns “defiance and disregard for his mother's wishes,” furthering his unruly ways.<sup>259</sup>

Regardless of whether a Syrian woman worked outside the home, as a peddler for instance, their families were targets of social reform scrutiny. When the men of the family peddled and the women worked together to support their families in their absence, as often was the case, their adapted living arrangements were viewed as a dangerous disruption of the American heteronormative family unit, as “aberrations of the normal family economy.”<sup>260</sup> In her extensive research, Alixa Naff found that, “Relatively few women succeeded without the help of one or more women. The earnings of wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, their sacrifices and labor, staved off poverty and failure

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259. “Proceedings. Selected Papers of the Annual Meeting,” Records of the National Conference of Social Work (1925), 432-434.

260. Gualitieri, *Between Arab and White*, 144.

in many cases and in many more cases enabled the family to improve and accelerate economic and social positions.”<sup>261</sup> These kinds of arrangements were enough for the Industrial Commission on Immigration to take note, writing about the New York Syrian neighborhood in 1901: “It is not extraordinary to find 6 to 8 women making their headquarters in such a garret, their husbands away peddling and their children in institutions.”<sup>262</sup> In one succinct sentence, the Syrian family is pathologized on three levels: the neglect of patriarchal duty in the husbands’ absence, the abnormality of wives in their economy of support for one another, and the dependency of children in benefiting from state welfare.

Many Syrian families also took on boarders out of necessity for additional income, who were frequently other Syrian peddlers passing through town. The presence of additional people in the home, usually non-relative men, added further stigma to Syrian immigrant means of survival, both from within the Syrian community and without. Syrian communities had a word in Arabic, *fadiha*, for a “scandal with sexual overtones” that was specifically in reference to having boarders in the space of the family home, and boarding houses were often those locales designated as houses of “ill repute” or “ill fame” in social welfare records.<sup>263</sup> The policing of the Syrian home and the policing of Syrian women were one and the same. Women and girls were at the center of boarding house controversies, as their honor was always at stake. Young girls’ sexuality

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261. Naff, *Becoming American*, 178.

262. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 144.

263. Khater, *Inventing Home*, 80; Khater, “Like Pure Gold,” 92.

was at risk with men in the house and mothers were at fault for the unsupervised “strangers” that were in their homes.

A good example of the discursive frenzy regarding boarding houses concerns the Said family—the family whose case file opened this chapter. Before the marriage of Nazha and Salem Said, boarding houses provided a critical subsistence for Nazha. After the death of her first husband, she and her two sons lived with her sister who ran a boarding house. Victoria Karam, the Syrian American social worker, noted that this particular boarding house was known to be “somewhat immoral.”<sup>264</sup> During that time, her sons were taken away from her. Again, Karam’s notes are instructive; she surmises that the social worker involved in the removal of Nazha’s sons “got to know about them through his aunt.” This statement implied that the woman running the boarding house had already attracted the gaze of social reform workers. After her sons were taken from her, Nazha bought a house, which she used to run a boarding house herself.<sup>265</sup> There, Nazha met Salem, while he stayed at her house as a boarder. Once they married, he convinced her to sell the boarding house and put the money toward the family. Years later, as the husband alternately could not find work or refused to look for work, the Suids took out a loan to purchase a new house in which they could take on boarders while they lived in the basement. At this time, Salem’s four daughters from a previous marriage were living with

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264. The International Institute of Boston, Massachusetts Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Box 13, Folder 256.

265. There is no indication in the case file notes of how, financially, she was able to do this.

them, as well as one of Nazha's sons from her first marriage, and their two other daughters, both under the age of 1. In December of 1926, the youngest baby died of pneumonia and Karam's notes implied that the death resulted from neglect. In previous visits, Karam noted that the two youngest children seemed "too pale" and that they were not able to go outside enough, because Nazha was running the boarding house. Nazha grew frustrated with her husband's lack of employment in contrast to her own full load of work. In Victoria Karam's words, "she has to take care of the whole boarding house and the washing and besides care for his daughters and their meals and at the end all her work is not appreciated and she does not have a cent in her pocket while he loafes around and does not make any effort to work."<sup>266</sup>

Although the social worker reserved a good deal of ire for the husband, the majority of her scrutiny (a mix of pity and disdain) was directed at the wife. Although the boarding house revenue enabled the family to get by, the social worker tried to convince Nazha to stop working and devote all her energies to her children and her home. Nazha would not do this because her husband was not bringing in any income. That their home was the site of their revenue was of great concern to Victoria Karam and the other social workers in her network, despite the fact that boarding house (and alternately Nazha's sporadic work outside the home) was the only income the family had.

In the case of another family, the boarding house is a central feature of tragic events, chronicled in the case file notes. Mary and Najeeb George came in contact with

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266. The International Institute of Boston, Massachusetts Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Box 13, Folder 256.

the International Institute of Boston in 1925, due to poverty and a tumultuous marriage. Najeeb was disabled from a work-related accident and was diagnosed with a psychological condition. Mary was living separately with their children but returned to her husband when she was granted legal guardianship of him. Victoria Karam's notes revealed that Mary George had relationships with other men, who at times also housed her and supported her financially. Victoria also noted that several of her children were "illegitimate."<sup>267</sup> Eventually, Mary and Najeeb divorced, and Mary left with their youngest two children. She opened a boarding house and had another child (she did not remarry). This case file ends after one of Mary's children was beaten by a boarder and died from the injuries. Here, the boarding house serves as the catalyst for Mary's failed motherhood: the death of a child due to violence from a "stranger" in the home.

In both of these cases, the women of the households were not dependent in the right ways, as understood by social workers. Dependency was stigmatized for single women (as they were thought to be or become public charges), but a certain kind of dependency was desirable for married women.<sup>268</sup> In the eyes of social workers, Syrian women were not properly dependent upon Syrian men, as the "rightful" heads of the family. Syrian women peddlers were the 'bad' kind of dependent, cast in particularly immoral terms: they relied upon public assistance to get by; they placed their children in the care of family members or worse, in the care of the state, in order to peddle; and

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267. The International Institute of Boston, Massachusetts Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Box 13, Folder 315.

268. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 26.

many refused the “help” of social reformers to get them to cease working outside of their homes.<sup>269</sup> When Syrian men were discussed in social work texts, the dependency discourse echoed the racist ways in which Black men were characterized as “unable to dominate” Black women.<sup>270</sup> Syrian men were seen as “idle” and lazy, in stark contrast to their stubborn wives who refused white, bourgeois domestic roles. One social welfare organization’s incisive condemnation of Syrian peddling reflects the violation of this hierarchy: “It is not the custom in this country to let the women work and have the men remain idle at home. It is not natural for mothers to leave their children during the day to be looked after by men. When girls and young men go out on the streets to peddle, they fall into bad company; and, as one who understands his people well says, ‘they often end by going to houses of ill-repute.’”<sup>271</sup>

The stubbornness of Syrian women has also persisted in accounts of these early immigrant peddlers. In one example, a Syrian woman immigrant recounts a story about peddling and migration which demonstrates the agency inherent in such obstinacy: “Long ago, over thirty years, my husband came here first. I wanted to come with him, but he refused, saying that it would be a shame on him to let his wife travel to the end of the world in order to earn a living. I insisted that we should emigrate together and take the children with us. We had four of them. Finally, we split the family; my husband emigrated with our oldest daughter, and I stayed with the rest of the children behind. The

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269. Fraser and Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency,” 320.

270. Ibid, 319.

271. “Annual Report,” Associated Charities of Boston (Boston, 1899), 58.

climate here did not suit my husband, and he fell ill. I left the children with their grandmother and joined him. I tried peddling, as soon as I arrived, and succeeded very well at it, making much money. *Then I sent my husband back home and continued my successful peddling.*<sup>272</sup>

Working outside the home prevented women from receiving aid, but aid alone was not enough to support a family. Leaving children unattended in order to work was grounds for child removal. Sending older children out to work so that a woman could stay home to take care of the rest of the family was neglect. Taking in boarders was considered highly immoral and receiving any kind of help from a non-relative male was assumed to be linked with prostitution. Thus, poor Syrian women were stuck in multiple contexts of “dependency” that forced them back into the scrutinizing purview of social welfare workers, again and again.<sup>273</sup>

#### SEXUAL DEVIANCE, MOBILITY, AND THE QUESTION OF NORMALCY

In 1911, Louise Seymour Houghton authored a four-part series in the social work periodical *The Survey*, on the Syrian immigrant community in the United States. Not unlike other features on immigration of the time, the series was divided into sections that gave a sociological and anthropological overview of the community and its place in American society: “Sources and Settlement,” “Business Activities,” “Intellectual and

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272. Afif I. Tannous, “Acculturation of An Arab-Syrian Community in the Deep South,” *American Sociological Review* 8, 3 (1943): 271, emphasis added.

273. Mason, *From Father’s Property*, 93.

Social Status,” and “The Syrian as an American Citizen.”<sup>274</sup> In the second part of the series, Houghton described Syrian women peddlers as beacons of independence, glamorizing and glorifying “the open air, the broad sky, the song of birds, and the smell of flowers, the right to work or to rest at her own pleasure.” Houghton went on to defend those women who were reticent to give up peddling for other professions or for work at home. She wrote, “Why should she who has been a whole person, and her own person, become a mere ‘hand’ and that the hand of another?... When the woman yields and abandons peddling for less congenial (and usually less profitable) work, she yields not to argument, but to a subtle and keen consciousness that her social standing among these incomprehensible Americans will somehow be thereby improved.”<sup>275</sup>

Within this discussion on Syrian women peddlers, Houghton referred to a Boston campaign to convince Syrian women to abandon this occupation. In 1899, the Associated Charities of Boston had been so concerned about the tendency for Syrian women to figure among the city’s peddling population that they urged Syrian women to quit their peddling work “for some more self-respecting occupation,” although it is unclear what other kind of profession would have been acceptable. Boston social workers railed against what they too saw as an uncomfortable proximity of peddling to begging, arguing that peddling for Syrians was a way to avoid work and that deceit formed a crucial

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274. Houghton, Louise Seymour. “Syrians in the United States: Sources and Settlement,” *The Survey*, July 1, 1911; “Syrians in the United States: Business Activities,” August 5, 1911.; “Syrians in the United States: Intellectual and Social Status”; Sept. 2, 1911; “Syrians in the United States: The Syrian as an American Citizen,” v. 27, Oct. 7, 1911, 957-968.

275. Houghton, “Syrians in the United States: Business Activities,” 648.

component: “These persons are said to have very little idea of truth, to consider lying a legitimate method of doing business.”<sup>276</sup> The campaign went so far as to assert that buying from peddlers “encourages begging, lying, idleness, neglect, exposure, and a further increase of Syrians to ‘sweep up money from our streets.’”<sup>277</sup> But despite the best efforts of the Boston charities, in a follow up report six years later, the situation had not improved, and if anything had worsened, since Syrians continued to migrate to the United States and take up peddling like their compatriots. While at the onset of the campaign Syrians could “eventually become useful citizens” just like the rehabilitable “street Arab,” six years later, after the men had shown their unwillingness to take up factory work en masse and the women their stubborn refusal to work only inside their homes, the report concludes by characterizing them as “undesirable immigrants.”<sup>278</sup> This illustrates the position of Syrians at the margins of whiteness: there were possibilities for them to be included, as well as dangers that would lead to their exclusion.

While Houghton is notable for her unique, positive portrayal of the Syrian woman peddler, she prefaced her discussion of Syrian business activities by noting that peddling is close in nature to begging and that begging is “in Syria a privileged, if not an

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276. Annual Report, Association Charities of Boston, 1899, 57.

277. Ibid, 57.

278. Ibid, 60; Annual Report, Associated Charities of Boston, 1905, 41. Additionally, one reason that Syrian men were not as keen to work in factories was because their sense of honor was closely tied to working the land. In this light, peddling may have been something that approximated or kept them closer to their desired vocations. See Khater, *Inventing Home*, 33.

honored, calling.”<sup>279</sup> This association was not original to Houghton, but was a typical trope of Orientalist knowledge production regarding Syrian migration. In an article published in 1904, an official of the U.S. Public Health and Marine Hospital Services explained the phenomenon of Levantine immigration to the United States and all its accompanying ills. Central to this description was peddling and gender: “The Syrian is averse to work of any kind, but he will never work hard at physical labor. He sends his wife and children out to peddle from door to door the oriental rugs, silks, laces and peddling truck. From peddling it is only a step to begging, and many of these peddlers combine the two vocations.”<sup>280</sup> The author described Syrians as “true parasites” who follow the summer and winter vacation patterns of the rich, in order to sell to them. Citing the missionary connection between the United States and West Asia, McLaughlin asserted that Syrians “always associate America in their minds with missionaries and charitable institutions” and that their “fawning humility” is just a cover for the “guile of the oriental”:

The mental processes of these people have an oriental subtlety. Centuries of subjection, where existence was only possible through intrigue, deceit and servility, have left their mark and, through force of habit, they lie most naturally and by preference, and only tell the truth when it will serve their purpose best. Their wits are sharpened by generations of commercial dealing, and their business acumen is marvelous. With all due admiration for the mental qualities and trading skill of these parasites from the near east, it can not be said that they are anything, the vocations they follow, but detrimental and burdensome. These people, in addition, because of their miserable physique and tendency to communicable disease, are a distinct menace, in their crowded unsanitary quarters, to the health

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279. Houghton, “Syrians in the United States: Business Activities,” 647.

280. Allan McLaughlin, “Hebrew, Magyar, and Levantine Immigration,” *Popular Science Monthly* 65, 5 (1904), 442.

of the community.<sup>281</sup>

From this passage we learn that, be it in peddling or in interactions with U.S. charity workers, the Syrian's entreaty for sympathy, aid, or a sale could not be trusted as genuine. Their true conditions in life did not matter, as their strategic wit and maneuvering was always at play and their "work" was merely a guise for begging.

The link between peddling and begging dated back to the mid nineteenth century with the introduction of the "ugly law"—an ordinance which sought to restrict the display of disabled and poor bodies from public view.<sup>282</sup> Such laws also simultaneously regulated gender and sexuality in the act of public display. For instance, a typical "ugly law" penalized someone who was "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed" for being "in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares or public places."<sup>283</sup> But gender and sexuality were also implicated in the "ugly": these laws often prohibited cross-dressing, distributing "lewd" material, and women acting "lewd" or in "bold display of herself" as well.<sup>284</sup> Whereas for male "tramps" or beggars these "ugly laws" concerned the disabled or injured body, for women the laws also focused upon their appearance and "lack of attraction and beauty."<sup>285</sup> Proper femininity was not amenable to public display and the ways in which a woman displayed her femininity were explicitly policed in these

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281. McLaughlin, "Levantine Immigration," 443.

282. Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

283. *Ibid*, 3.

284. *Ibid*, 144.

285. *Ibid*, 145.

ordinances. The category of “unsightliness” used in these ordinances also allowed anyone non-white, disabled or not, to be in this category.<sup>286</sup> A woman’s whiteness (or lack thereof) was undeniably linked to her degree of femininity, and vice versa. Thus these ordinances set white female standards of beauty in stark relief. For Syrian women, moving through public space—either to get to work or as a result of their work—was a direct threat to any attainment of normative womanhood or whiteness.

Although the Syrian community tried (and its contemporary scholarly interlocutors continue to try) to distinguish peddling from begging, the associations between the two activities were linked well before the first wave of Syrian migration in the United States. For the Syrian intelligentsia who did not shun peddling altogether, they attempted to distance the profession discursively from begging by emphasizing peddling as an adaptable and clever form of entrepreneurship (see chapter 1). In those explanations, peddling may indeed seem distinct from begging, but given the door-to-door nature of the work and the use or welcome of pity in order to make a sale—not to mention the overall prevalence of journalists, Orientalists and social workers to conflate the two—these acts remained linked. Take, for example, these two descriptions the first of female beggars and the other of female Syrian peddlers. The first text, from 1898, noted how women beggars were typified by their appearance: “Lowest are the door-to-door beggars, ‘drifters’ or ‘floaters,’ with the ‘blackhoods,’ the women who beg on the side streets and in front of the churches and are hard to dispose of.”<sup>287</sup> The second text is

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286. Ibid, 193.

287. Ibid, 146.

from an interview conducted in 1962 with a former Syrian peddler: “Women would wear the black scarves on their heads. Up to 15 of us would leave together daily. You’d see them at the street car stop. A saloon owner used to make fun of them. All packed and dressed funny and going out like gypsies.”<sup>288</sup> The black hoods or scarves served to mark women peddlers and beggars as one and the same. The Syrian peddler’s own description of the women “going out like gypsies” links peddling to begging through stereotypes of the Roma people. Public concerns about immigrant beggars in particular “played out in contestation over immigrant peddlers,” demonstrating the “perpetually line and wavering” line between peddling and begging.<sup>289</sup> Some leaders from peddling communities even wanted to ban peddling because they felt it reflected badly on the whole community.<sup>290</sup>

Returning to the series of articles written by Louise Houghton in *The Survey* that opened this section, there were two reader’s letters printed in response, both of which centered upon women and peddling within the community. The first was from a reader who wished to clarify some distinctions between Syrians and Armenians: Armenian women were not peddlers. The reader claimed that Syrian women were posing as Armenians at the door and faking stories of “sorrow and suffering in the recent massacres” in order to play on the American public’s sympathies for the Armenian genocide. “There are practically no Armenian women in America who peddle,” the

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288. Naff, *Becoming American*, 166.

289. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*, 178.

290. *Ibid.* 212.

reader wrote, “for the Armenian man, no matter how poor he may be, is almost always too proud to permit his wife or sister to run about the streets begging or peddling.”<sup>291</sup> The second letter came from a social worker in Boston who defended the campaign against Syrian women peddlers, remarking that any negative characterizations of the community came from experience. “When we first dealt with [Syrians] they were treated by every charitable society exactly as other people, but we found them extremely untrustworthy and unreliable. Few employers in Boston have found them satisfactory and they have taken great pains to cheat the charitable societies, which accounts for the feeling existing here.”<sup>292</sup> The reader also compares the streets and homes in the Syrian quarter with those of other nationalities and finds them “the dirtiest that are in my district.” But the crux of the letter is to refute Houghton’s claim that the Syrian women who work outside the home are unmarried (and thus not neglecting maternal and marital duties). The reader retorts, “We have here many married women who peddle. Some of them have left their husbands in Syria, and some of them, in the testimony of their own educated countrymen, are of immoral character.”<sup>293</sup> The implication here was that Syrian women peddlers were physically estranged from their husbands through their own actions and had children at home or in Syria that were being neglected in their absence, and the “immoral character” that their “countrymen” referred to pertained to their sexual virtue and honor.

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291. Y.M. Karekin, “Armenians Not Peddlers,” *The Survey*, v. 26, Sept. 9, 1911, 841.

292. C., “Syrians in Boston,” *The Survey*, v. 27, Oct. 29, 1911, 1088.

293. *Ibid*, 1088.

Deportation records from the same period reflect this same unease with the autonomy and transgression of U.S. marriage customs by Syrian migrant women. One woman, Malake Sultan, was deported in 1914 because, although having declared herself a widow, she was accused of having left her husband and child in Syria, as well as having sexual relationships with several men besides her husband. Another Syrian woman, Zahia Antony, was married but posed as the wife of another man in order to come to the United States via Canada. Antony worked and successfully supported herself as a peddler, but she was deported in 1910 on the grounds that she was liable to become a public charge, pointing to the perception that peddling was not a “real” job. Interestingly, these cases were investigated by the Bureau of Immigration because of the entreaties of family or community members in Syria who were disgruntled with the women’s lives in diaspora.<sup>294</sup> For instance, another woman, Tillie Asseff, left her children in the care of family members in Mount Lebanon after the death of her husband. She immigrated to the United States with another man and started a new family, but she did not attract the attention of the Bureau of Immigration, presumably because her family back home did not try to have her deported.<sup>295</sup> And yet, every time a Syrian woman used the services of a public or private charitable, medical, or otherwise governmental institution, she risked

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294. Deirdre M. Maloney, “Women, Sexual Morality, and Economic Dependency in Early U.S. Deportation Policy,” *Journal of Women's History* 18, 2 (2006), 111.

295. This woman was my great-great grandmother. Her daughter married and followed her migration path to the same small U.S. city, but the families were never fully reconciled.

deportation.<sup>296</sup>

While readers of *The Survey* were left with an overall positive feature on the Syrian community, the associations between peddling and begging, along with the sexual and moral implications of the work and lifestyles of Syrian women peddlers, were left open. If these associations, as well as the act of peddling (and its spatial and behavioral transgressions for women in particular), correlated with the view that Syrians were racially and/or culturally ‘other,’ then peddling as it was so centrally linked to the identity of the Syrian community had to stop in order for this community to become ‘white.’ For Syrian women to become acceptable women, that is to say *white* women, peddling had to stop.

From the discursive constitution of social welfare, Syrian women were in a double bind. In Syrian families where men peddled and women stayed at home, the adapted living arrangements and systems of support that women developed were suspect. When Syrian women were peddlers themselves (or when they held other jobs working outside the home), they were cast as negligent mothers who were dependent upon the state because they put their children in state care in order to work. The concern from social workers about peddling among Syrians was at once a concern about gender and sexual normalcy, particularly in the case of Boston where so many women in the Syrian community peddled. The navigation of public spaces—such as public squares, train stations, and driving cars—was inherent in the mobility of peddling. These types of

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296. Maloney, “Women, Sexual Morality and Economic Dependency,” 111.

activities were viewed as a “trespassing” of gendered boundaries.<sup>297</sup>

Social welfare records also hint at associations between female mobility and prostitution.<sup>298</sup> Within the Syrian community, rumors of such associations were abundant when women peddled further from home (even though long-distance women peddlers usually traveled with a male relative). Syrian community archives also reflect these associations between female peddlers and prostitution, but perhaps not for the reasons the social workers would have imagined. There are multiple accounts that suggest that some women peddling in places such as Fort Wayne, Indiana, and Billings, Montana, peddled to brothels and to sex workers because the women were kind and purchased finer items from them.<sup>299</sup> On the other hand, rumors also circulated within the Syrian community that certain women peddled more than just dry goods and notions and would do “humiliating things” in order to make a sale.<sup>300</sup>

As many women of color feminist scholars have documented, the boundaries and criterion of womanhood and femininity are explicitly linked to sexuality and race. While for men, the first half of the twentieth century saw a growing concern with male same-sex sexuality among white men in the United States, the parallel concerns of “perversion”

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297. Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls*, 111.

298. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 127; Kunzel, *Fallen Women*; Tice, *Tales of Wayward Girls*.

299. Shakir, *Bint Arab*, 38; Khater, “Like Pure Gold,” 66-67.

300. Dina Dahbany-Miraglia, “Random Thoughts on the Position of Women Among Early Arab Immigrants.” N.d., Unpublished manuscript. Center for Migration Studies, Syrian American Archival Collection, Group II, Box 5, Folder 149; Khater, “Like Pure Gold,” 92-93.

and “deviance” for white women centered on abnormal heterosexuality.<sup>301</sup> Thus, overlaying their ambiguous racial position, Syrian women who peddled endangered not only their safety, but also any possible claim to sexual normalcy and whiteness. For instance, Regina Kunzel’s research shows that transgressing public space—for purposes of leisure or work—was widely linked to the anxieties surrounding unwed mothers and sexual promiscuity.<sup>302</sup>

I want to return now to the story that opened this chapter—that of the encounter between Nazha and Salem Said and the International Institute of Boston. Ostensibly, the relationship between this agency and the Said family began because of the troubles they were experiencing with Nazha’s eldest son. But from the case notes, it is unclear whether or not the Suids wanted help from a social welfare agency on this matter. The case notes simply indicated that it was the “interest” of a social work student that brought the attention of the International Institute on to this family. Indeed, the relationship between the father and the step-son had so deteriorated that the son had been found “delinquent” and the father was so troubled that he “had no mind for work.” But once the interest of the Syrian secretary had been piqued, the son’s behavior became one of many issues in need of reform in the family, and as the son was scrutinized, so were the parents—particularly the mother. The case file notes show a good deal of judgment toward the Said family. The father was found to have “led a low and immoral life” as a gambler and

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301. Canaday, *The Straight State*, 12.

302. Kunzel, *Fallen Women*, 58.

womanizer previous to his current marriage and the notes clearly chastised him for a lack of ambition and drive to bring in money to the family.<sup>303</sup> And yet, the vast majority of documentation concerned the mother, her parenting and management of the house, her relationship with her children, and her marriage, including her desire at many instances to leave her family.

The narrative of a case file is a strange form. It begins with facts in institutional form: names, dates of birth, ages, addresses, occupations as well as noting the other agencies that the person or family previously encountered. But as the narrative of the social worker's notes begin, the focus is immediately upon what is "wrong"—what is the issue that has led the family to seek aid? This documentation descends from the perspective that the family or people it concerns are flawed in some way and must be attended to in order to rectify that flaw, be it poverty, "defect," juvenile "delinquency," or any other myriad concern plaguing working class immigrant life. The narrative notes not only the social worker's interactions with the family and information about each of the family members, but also their interactions with other social workers, medical professionals, government officials, and neighbors, relatives, and community members of the family. And then, just as swiftly as the narrative starts, the family disappears from the social work archive. In this case, contact between the International Institute of Boston and the Said family diminished significantly when the Syrian social worker married, had a baby, and was on maternity leave. The other social workers at the agency remarked in

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303. The International Institute of Boston, Massachusetts Records, General/Multiethnic Collection, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota, Box 13, Folder 256.

the case notes that, “Since we lost our Syrian worker in April 1929, we have had but slight contact with the family.”<sup>304</sup> Even after Victoria Karam returns married as Victoria Abboud, the contact is not nearly as sustained as it had been for the previous five years and is often with the other (non-Arab) workers of the agency. In 1930, at the Family Welfare Society conference, representatives from a group of agencies convene to discuss the Said family and their “case.” The representative of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC) felt that they had “never got at the bottom of the difficulties in the Said family” and questioned the veracity of information procured from the family members themselves. Victoria Abboud continued to appeal to Syrian community members and organizations for aid on their behalf, but to no avail because “they felt that Mr. Said was lazy and using money he received foolishly and that he should provide for his children.” The oldest daughter, by this time, was again in foster care and “she hardly ever comes to see her family.” In 1933, Mr. Said died and after a short session in a juvenile girl’s facility, the next eldest daughter followed the oldest daughter’s footsteps into a foster home: she “does not want to go home; Mrs. Said does not want her there, so she is placed in a home.”<sup>305</sup> Despite a sustained and detailed engagement with the Said family over a ten year period, there was no more news of the family after this.

The records of social welfare organizations painstakingly documented the anxieties of the U.S. white middle class regarding the lives of poor Syrian immigrant families. While Syrians, as a small percentage of the overall immigrant population, were

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304. Ibid.

305. Ibid.

often absent from national conversations about the changing demographics of the United States, Syrian women and children appear frequently within the archives of social work, and the discourse surrounding them reiterated their community's affiliation with peddling in damning ways. Social workers were particularly concerned with Syrian women who labored in addition to (or to the neglect of) their "womanly" duties of childrearing and housekeeping. Syrian women peddlers were abhorred most of all, as this practice put women in improper public view, was closely linked with begging, left Syrian homes unguarded from vice and decay, and violated the proper hierarchy of dependency of children upon mothers and wives upon husbands (rather than the state).

The state of dependency attached to Syrian women and children in social welfare records reflected their inbetween racial status insofar as that status hinged upon gender and sexual normativity. The use of the Orientalist trope of the "Asiatic" to solidify peddling as a defining trait of the Syrian community exemplified the classed nature of racial taxonomies. While the dishonesty of peddling, the immorality of working women and the "neglect" of working children reinforced Orientalist ideas of cultural barbarism and servility and pathologized the Syrian community, the idea that Syrians could be reformed to become "useful citizens" aligned with attitudes toward "white ethnics"—those immigrant groups who were posited as different from normative whiteness but deemed assimilable just the same. Still, the divergence from attitudes toward European immigrant groups in the Syrian case lay in the use of Orientalism itself: for Syrians, Orientalist imagery was used, not as analogy or approximation, but as epistemological description, as a generative force for what "Syrian" and "Arab" would mean in the

American context.

Thus, social welfare anxieties surrounding Syrian women working outside of the home, and peddling door-to-door in particular, were not only about proper gender roles for women but about the sexual economy of the American family. Importantly, the anxieties surrounding transience versus settlement in Arab American historical narratives are also about this sexual economy. Understood another way, these anxieties betray the queerness of the Syrian immigrant family. My analysis of social welfare scrutiny shows that Syrian families were a crucial site for exclusion from or inclusion into the nation. In the following chapter, we will see how the visual framing of the Syrian family, through photography, helped to fuel that inclusive strategy, by presenting the Syrian family, and Syrian women, as respectable. We will also see, however, what happens when these family photographs contain multiple meanings that contradict the assimilative norms laid out by social workers. These photographs provide a space for understanding a present absence of non-normativity, and an alternative to respectability, within the ethnic-nationalist archive.

## Chapter 4

### **Erotics and Intimacies: Imaging and Imagining Pleasure in Early Arab America**

In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I have traced the ways in which early Arab migrants in the United States and their descendants were figured as racially “in between” white and non-white through the Syrian peddling economy. I have also enumerated the strategies used by Arab American studies scholars to frame this population as an exclusively upwardly-mobile, assimilative, and respectable community. This strategy of historical analysis erases the discursive and material violence that Syrian Americans endured because of their racial “inbetweenness”—that violence is the subject of chapters two and three. However, the practices and ways of being that endangered Syrians by shifting them closer to non-whiteness (specifically, peddling practices that crossed gendered and sexual norms of the white American middle class) were not exclusively sites of violence; they were also sites of pleasure. With the exception of Alixa Naff’s and Evelyn Shakir’s scholarship on Arab American women at work, Arab American history has often confined pleasure in ways that obscure the social instability of Arab familial and community structures in the American context. For Arab American history to be a *decolonial* history—that is, a history that “tells more of our stories” and “makes agency for those on the margins transformative”—<sup>306</sup> we must account for pleasure in ways that acknowledge these complexities, rather than evading them. In

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306. Emma Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard,” *Frontiers* 24, 2/3 (2003), 123.

chapter one, I called for a “history of the possible” that could animate Arab American history in ways that would mitigate various forms of essentialism. This chapter centers pleasure within that realm of the possible and asks how Arab American studies can account for this pleasure historically. In this chapter, I demonstrate a critically imaginative reading of Arab American historical documents, specifically photographs, in order to foreground pleasure in Arab American history.

In September of 2011, I visited the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection at the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of American History. This collection, which was created by Alixa Naff during the course of her scholarly career, is known especially for its oral histories with first and second generation Arab Americans from the early community. I visited the Naff archive thinking that these materials would be my focus. However, there were also over 2000 photographs in the collection and the visual quickly captured my attention. I was drawn to the ways in which photographs seem to stand as unmediated evidence of historical acts and, in particular, how these photographs recuperated the Arab family as a normative American unit: Syrian immigrants were “pioneer” peddlers with families depending upon them, using horses and drawn carriages, as well as packs on their backs and motorized vehicles; Syrian families owned and operated groceries, general stores, restaurants, and ice cream shops; Syrian families enjoyed time at the beach, drove cars, and had formal family portraits taken. These were all different types of photographs that I encountered in the Naff archive with the same thread of familial normativity that one could interpret throughout. Among these images, formal family portraits and images of Syrians at work

predominated. As part of this ethnic archive, these photographs enact the respectability of the early Arab American community through the visual representation of heteronormative family structures and proper laboring practices.<sup>307</sup> But sprinkled among this collection were other photographs—outdoor images, some posed and some candid—in which men *or* women were socializing together; they were sex-segregated photographic spaces that illuminate the homosocial bonds of Arab families and communities, and Syrian peddlers in particular. My discussion in this chapter focuses primarily on three photographs that I believe were included in the Naff archival materials because they lend themselves to a normative gender and sexual reading—that is, like the formal family portrait, they can be interpreted as evidence of Syrian American “normalcy” via heteronormativity. Yet at the same time this heteronormative reading is not the exclusive meaning that we can glean from these images. In particular, the photographs used in this chapter allow for a focus on the pleasure related to peddling: both the possibilities of pleasure in the act of peddling and in the pleasure between and among peddlers while not at work. I will unpack the fraught history of visual representation and photography for Arabs, discuss how the photographs in the Naff collection fit into the larger narrative of the archive, and then

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307. The majority of the photos of Syrians “at work” show men working. This connects to respectable representations of the family by putting Syrian men in their rightful place—working outside the home, so that their wives could stay home and care for children. However, other photos show Syrian women at work, outside the home, as well. These photos threaten to contradict the respectability of the other “men at work” photos, as demonstrated by chapter 3. However, within the narrative of the Naff archive, photos of women at work demonstrate the liberation of Syrian women within the context of their migration to the United States. For more on the volatile nature of showing Arab women at work, see Sally Howell, “Picturing Women, Class, and Community in Arab Detroit: The Strange Case of Eva Habib,” *Visual Anthropology* 10 (1998), 209-26.

give my own imagining of the photographs I have selected. As I will demonstrate, the importance of these photographs is not just in what they mean as texts but in what they *do* as multivalent pedagogical objects of Arab America.

Although all of the images in the Naff collection can have multiple meanings, I found the images I present here particularly fruitful for thinking about the repression of same-sex pleasure in the constructed narrative about early Arab American communities. Put another way, homosociality and homoeroticism function as present absences, or traces of these non-normative connections that have been occluded within the Arab American archive.<sup>308</sup> I thus read these photographs and theorize the work that they do in order to provide an example of the queer traces in Arab American history. The queerness here lies in several domains: in the possibility, which includes the reality, of same-sex desire—same-sex relationships and/or sexual acts were possible between peddlers on the road and between women who stayed at home; in the impossibility of banishing non-normative desires and intimacies from the archive (not limited to same-sex intimacies); and in enacting a methodological practice of “queer looking.” Thus, as I produce knowledge about these photographs within the Naff archive, I am not looking for a non-normative sexuality or gender as an identity, but for pleasures that can be read as queer—pleasures that, particularly in relation to white American cultural norms (in the context of this immigration) and to European cultural norms (in the context of colonialism), were used to bolster the notion of a cultural and racial difference of Arabs from those

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308. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976).

normative ways of being.

It is certain that peddling was difficult and dangerous work: peddlers were frequently robbed while on the road; they were subject to the whims of the elements, particularly when they could not find shelter at night; long-distance peddling could be a lonely and physically grueling experience; and there are numerous instances of peddlers who were murdered while peddling.<sup>309</sup> More generally, transient workers were targeted by immigration restrictions, property ownership and voting laws, and police campaigns in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>310</sup> This dissertation has also outlined the discursive violence enacted through the ideas that circulated about peddlers and Syrians immigrants: they were manipulative, distrustful, lazy, and subservient; their “work” was a ruse for begging; their men were ineffective, sexually deviant, and abandoned their duties toward the family; and their women were irreverent, failed mothers and persisted in breaking the conventions for “proper” women. But peddling cannot be entirely characterized by the hardships it entailed, and doing so relegates Syrian peddling experiences to the realm of violence. It is crucial, then, that Arab American studies understand that there was also

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309. “Nuggets of News,” *The Free Lance*. March 12, 1907. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87060165/1907-03-12/ed-1/seq-4/>; “Pocahantas Items,” *Highland Recorder*. February 9, 1906. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn95079246/1906-02-09/ed-1/seq-2/>; *Highland Recorder*. June 14, 1907. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn95079246/1907-06-14/ed-1/seq-3/>; “Convictions for Murder,” *Staunton Spectator and Vindicator*. January 26, 1906. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84024720/1906-01-26/ed-1/seq-2/>; Daily Press Newport News, March 9, 1907; “Murder,” *The Weekly Messenger*. August 21, 1897. <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064454/1897-08-21/ed-1/seq-2/>. The majority of these instances also involved a robbery. However one instance was motivated by a local resident's ire toward Syrian peddlers in particular.

310. Shah, *Stranger Intimacy*, 2.

pleasure in peddling and pleasure in the peddling economy, and that this pleasure does not necessarily fit the respectability/upwardly-mobile/assimilation narrative that has been constructed for early Arab immigrants. What were these possibilities for pleasure? Although this list is not exhaustive, peddlers could experience different landscapes and meet new people in the course of their travels; peddlers who traveled together formed bonds with each other, as did the women who stayed home while men left to peddle; and women peddlers were able to experience a level of independence—in economics and mobility—that they may not have had otherwise.

#### THEORIZING PLEASURE: EROTICS AND INTIMACIES

In order to understand how pleasure functions within and through the photographs I will examine, a working definition of pleasure is necessary. But pleasure is a subjective experience. Something that elicits pleasure for one person maybe be unpleasant for another; the experience of physical pain is a prime example. The variety of reasons and ways that people experience pleasure works against a singular definition of pleasure. What is more feasible, and more productive, is to understand what links all of these varied experiences of pleasure. First, pleasure is an affective and corporeal experience, an experience that touches one's emotions and sensations that we recognize as our "feelings," as well as physical sensations in the rest of the body that may feel "good" but are often unarticulated or unnoticed. Second, pleasure occurs in relation to something else: to a physical sensation, to a thought or memory, to another person. Pleasure is thus relational as well as corporeal. Pleasure contains both erotic and intimate elements, two

concepts that center the sensory and corporeal, as well as the relational, respectively, in issues of power.<sup>311</sup> In this section, I detail a critical examination of intimacy and erotics in order to ground my understanding of pleasure regarding the photographs in this chapter.

Understanding that intimacy can be pleasurable, unpleasant/violent, or multiple configurations of both, I find Lisa Lowe's theorization of intimacy helpful here. Lowe outlines three types of intimacies that aid in understanding how power (specifically racialized, colonial power) works through relationships: spatial proximity, sexual and affective intimacy, and constellations of contact between people who are each situated differently in terms of power.<sup>312</sup> Understood this way, the experience of different environments and landscapes while peddling was an intimate experience, forcing Syrians to think about their relationship to the lands they traveled and the power of those lands over them, especially considering climate and weather. The encounters that peddlers had with their customers—whether friendly, hostile, or ambivalent—were intimate, as Syrians (and their customers) had to negotiate power-laden differences of language, race, culture, gender, and sometimes religion. The formation of bonds between peddlers while on the road—between siblings, cousins, friends, or others—was the formation of an intimate bond, and the new relationships that peddling enabled, specifically friendships and sexual relationships that may not have been possible within the Syrian settlements,

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311. Not all intimacies are pleasurable, but I understand pleasure as necessarily having an element of intimacy.

312. Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents."

were also intimate. Lowe cautions against the uncritical relegation of sexual and affective intimacies to the realm of the “private,” as doing so is part of the “biopolitics through which the colonial powers administered the enslaved and colonized and sought to indoctrinate the newly freed into Christian marriage and family.”<sup>313</sup> The example of peddling intimacies that were affective and sexual can help to illuminate the constructed nature of that confinement, as these intimacies occurred during the course of work or were enabled by particular laboring practices.

Lowe’s theory of intimacy and power is an analysis that links contacts and relationships that are commonly understood as “individual” with the systemic and macro levels of dominance. Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic is rooted in a different framework: the power that queer women of color have in their lives in relation to each other and to their own experiences, feelings, and desires. Used in conjunction with Lowe’s concept of intimacies, Lorde’s radical re-envisioning of the erotic further clarifies how peddling practices were sites of powerful possibility for homosocial and homoerotic pleasure. Lorde reminds us that the erotic is not only about the sexual, but more broadly about the sensual and the sensory. Lorde’s theory of the erotic allows for an articulation of peddling practices as laboring practices that also contained a sensuality and physicality of relationship to one’s work, world, and surroundings. Lorde calls this the act of “sharing deeply any pursuit with another person.”<sup>314</sup> I understand these erotics as a form

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313. Ibid, 195.

314. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 57.

of interdependence as it functioned in the Syrian peddling economy. The reading/imagining that I will demonstrate is important for reminding us of the ways in which stories of race are always simultaneously stories of gendered, sexual, and classed legibility or illegibility; specifically, the status of Syrian migrants' racial position not only hinged upon who they were positioned in relation to and where, but also upon how Syrian migrants were understood as gendered, sexual and classed beings—that is, whether they were understood as such in normative or non-normative ways. An analysis of pleasure, which accounts for its erotic (corporeal) and intimate (relational) elements, is essential to understanding this process for Syrians, because we can then understand that their affective lives had a dangerous potential to unsettle both the normative white American ideals of personhood, and the elite Syrian American response to it as well. Lorde says that the erotic is “the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.”<sup>315</sup> As such, the verbal articulation of erotic feelings, desire, friendship, or care, let alone the claim to a sexual identity, is not a requirement for theorizing erotic pleasure in peddling and making the possibilities of homoerotics visible. As men peddled together, women stayed home together, and other women peddled together, homosocial bonds were not only inevitable but they were *constitutive* of early Arab American culture.

At the same time, Arab American studies must also reckon with same-sex desire and sex in early Arab America. Where traditional historical methods are concerned, we need not seek evidence in visible groups of “homosexual” Syrian men; historian John Howard has shown that in rural spaces, where most of these peddlers operated, queer

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315. Ibid, 53.

sexual practices followed trajectories of circulation and mobility rather than congregation.<sup>316</sup> Additionally, the bars, boarding houses, train stations, and cars through which Syrian peddlers passed were what Nayan Shah calls “queer sexual publics”: they were semi-private spaces in which same-sex encounters were possible and frequent, at the same time that they were heavily policed.<sup>317</sup> The photographs in this chapter, however, are not in these particular semi-private spaces. They are all outdoors, most likely in someone’s yard, spaces that were both public and private in different ways than bars and boarding houses. Most importantly, these spaces were not policed like Shah’s “queer sexual publics” and the Syrians within them would not have then expected that policing. Proceeding from a “history of the possible,” rather than from what is documented in official archives, should not also preclude us from *knowing* that these desires and sexual acts happened in the early Arab American community.

The Syrian community adapted to peddling practices in order to maintain the system of interdependence, care, and companionship that it valued. Syrians who peddled together experienced this kind of interdependence: they relied upon each other for safety, food, shelter, and companionship on the road. The Syrian women who did not peddle, and worked from home while male relatives were away, combined households with other women in order to consolidate childcare, cooking, cleaning, and, again, for companionship. Those who stayed at home spent days preparing for the return of long-

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316. John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

317. Nayan Shah, “Policing Privacy, Migrants, and the Limits of Freedom,” *Social Text* 84 (2005), 281.

distance peddlers, readying rooms, harvesting crops, making mass amounts of popular Arabic foods.<sup>318</sup> Based on interviews with Syrian Americans from this early community, Alixa Naff poignantly describes the joy in these reunions and the rest that peddlers could find in the Syrian settlements. She writes:

It was in the settlements that peddlers revived their spirit and reveled in a sense of belonging. Here they rediscovered continuity with the past; *values, which often seemed out of place elsewhere, were validated*. It was here that life's vitality, numbered by the frustrations of the road, was restored; here people of their own kind spoke the same language, laughed at the same humor, called their names, and bantered in familiar accents. Here, they bathed, perhaps for the first time in weeks, and savored tastes they had craved. *Emotions, pent up on the road, poured forth in the settlements...*<sup>319</sup>

We could interpret this description as one that builds a homogeneous and essentializing version of the Syrian community, in which all members felt complete belonging, with no differences in power to complicate these feelings. Rather than this interpretation however, which does have merit, I'd like to focus instead on the articulation of cultural validation felt within the community and the affective release that Naff describes. I would argue that the Syrian values viewed as "out of place" were precisely the ones I've mentioned above—interdependence, companionship, and care—that were at odds with American ideals of independence, individualism, and self-sufficiency. The emotions that were "pent up on the road" and finally released when peddlers returned home could also be understood as Lorde's "unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." Thus, there was power in this validation and in this release, a power which conflicted with the disciplinary

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318. Naff, *Becoming American*, 213-14.

319. *Ibid*, 212, emphasis added.

economy of white supremacy in which Syrian Americans lived. I find this theoretical framework of pleasure particularly pertinent for thinking about peddling practices and the peddling economy, wherein Syrian migrants traveled together, braved unknown and sometimes hostile geographies together, and also came home and rejoiced together.

## PHOTOGRAPHY, PLEASURE, AND THE ARCHIVE

How, then, can we find pleasure in the archive? Can this pleasure be found in a photograph? If so, is it the photograph itself that provides pleasure, or is it in the way of looking at the photograph and the relationship animated between viewer and visual document? I contend that both methods can lead to pleasure and both are necessary components for a decolonial historical method.

Roland Barthes has famously called the photograph a “certificate of presence,”<sup>320</sup> a document which invokes “an existential connection between ‘the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens’ and the photographic image.”<sup>321</sup> Photographs, then, become essential items in the creation of archives, standing in as the ultimate piece of proof, signifying “the real” or the authentic. The idea that photographs are “truth” in representation continues to frame the way most of us, including historians, think about photography (the contemporary phenomenon of “photoshopping” aside). Walter Benjamin’s proclamation that photography was “the first truly revolutionary means of

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320. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 87.

321. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 1.

reproduction” gestured toward the liberatory possibilities of this apparatus, one in which the knowledge produced from photographs could be democratic and multiple.<sup>322</sup> But this medium also seemed to harness “the real” and make it far more accessible than visual art forms had been previously, allowing for that “real” image to be the representative image. Therein lies the contradictory nature of photography: photographic images, specifically portraits, can be both radically self-representative and essentializing, both honorific and repressive.<sup>323</sup> The articulations of these paradoxes have emerged as scholars have grappled with the expansive possibilities and varied meanings of photography—as an apparatus, as a visual archive, as a site of knowledge production (what photographs mean), and as a pedagogical tool (what photographs *do*).

As an apparatus, the advent of the camera allowed for a more rapid process of recording an image, as well as a closer resemblance to the actual figure or person in the image than mediums like painting or drawing. Because of the belief in the objectivity and “Truth” of science, the use of scientific processes in photography lent support to the idea that photographs were unmediated representations of “the real.” Photographs thus function as visual documentation, always-already existing as part of an archive of biopolitical knowledge: portraiture was used to establish the notion of a “knowable interiority” based on physical manifestations of the body, most frequently through immutable phenotypical traits of skin color, facial features, and head size, but also in

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322. Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1997), xviii.

323. Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 345.

material markers of class such as dress and decor.<sup>324</sup> Photography was thus employed in the creation of a white, middle-class identity throughout the nineteenth century, while it was simultaneously also implicated in eugenicist projects that pathologized non-whiteness, poverty, and disability.<sup>325</sup> As mediated through these labored frameworks of representation, photographic archives are sites through which “narratives of national belonging and exclusion are produced.”<sup>326</sup>

Close readings of these visual documents can help us to understand how the competing uses of photography have manifested in photographs as sources of historical knowledge. Because of the very constructed nature of photographic representation, as enumerated above, “reading” photographs can allow for a discernment of the visual regimes that regulate normative and non-normative bodies. In Shawn Michelle Smith’s words, “by throwing the body relentlessly into focus, photography highlighted the very constructed and contingent nature of the interiorities [that were expressed through portraiture].”<sup>327</sup> The meanings of photographs thus enable a critique of the disciplinary structures that produce the photographic portrait. The many interpretations possible of a single photographic image is also a source of abundance for historians and others looking for meaning in photographs themselves. While historians cannot assume that all photographs represent a truth in evidence, photographs can still provide important details

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324. Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

325. Smith, *American Archives*; Sekula, “The Body and the Archive.”

326. Smith, *American Archives*, 5.

327. *Ibid.*

of presence, time, and place for historians. Photographs are also a powerful window into self-representation. Because the advent of photography worked in tandem with European and American white supremacist and colonialist ideologies, photography has often been used to counteract those damaging reproductions. As access to photography increased across class lines, it enabled the oppressed to have ownership of and participation in the making of their own images.<sup>328</sup>

Although the meanings of photography as an apparatus and as a visual archive are rich sites for historical knowledge, scholars tend to focus on reading photographs as texts — that is, a focus on the meanings of photographs themselves. In response to this dominant way of thinking about photography, some visual culture scholars have urged a “shift from meaning to doing,” which “entails foregrounding the changing functionalities of this [visual] culture in relation to broader dynamics of nationalism, populations, religion, state, sexuality, and economy.”<sup>329</sup> Thus, asking what visual culture does, rather than what it means, involves thinking about the audience of the images and its context within the archive, as well as its relationship to broader socio-political forces. Photographs have an impact: they can circulate in private networks or through public arenas, they can shape affective relationships, they can enable new ways of knowing and new ways of being in the world. As for the photographs examined in this chapter, what they mean and what they *do* is myriad, existing in relationship to individuals, groups of

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328. bell hooks, “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life,” *The Photography Reader*, Ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 389.

329. Jigna Desai, Rajinder Dudrah and Amit Rai, “Bollywood Audiences Editorial,” *South Asian Popular Culture* 3, 2 (2005), p. 80.

people, and institutions. For me—a fourth generation queer mixed-heritage Arab American woman—these photographs allow me to imagine and create a relationship to Arab American history, and a relationship to my ancestors, that resists the prison of authenticity. In this relationship, my language (English), sexuality (queer), and geography (U.S.-born) become *part* of my Arabness, rather than mitigating factors. For someone else, these photographs may mean and do entirely different things. Beyond the varied individual impact, their placement within the Arab American archive bears witness to the homosocial and homoerotic bonds of Arab communities.

bell hooks describes the power and potential in a photograph of her father by saying, “it allows me to understand him, provides a way for me to know him that makes it possible to love him again and against all the other images, the ones that stand in the way of love.”<sup>330</sup> hooks’s photograph of her father enables an affective production that is decolonizing, and it announces the “visual complexity” of her father and of black people more generally.<sup>331</sup> This is an example of an intimate space created by one person’s relationship to a photographic image that is implicated in dynamics of power. The production of the photograph represents an act of power, in which a black American man participated in his own representation, while at the same time hooks’s relationship to that photograph became part of a larger decolonial process for African Americans: “We saw ourselves represented in these images not as caricatures, cartoon-like figures; we were

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330. hooks, “In Our Glory,” 388.

331. *Ibid*, 392.

there in full diversity of body, being, and expression, multidimensional.”<sup>332</sup>

Given the power that photography and portraiture can have, how does this power affect my use of photographs in this chapter? And how does the elusiveness of defining pleasure affect my method of reading for pleasure in this chapter toward a decolonial practice of Arab American studies? This particular part of my dissertation is not an attempt to “fill in the gaps” of the existing history. This is because a task of historical re-composition will always strain against the limits of its own possibility, as the records and archives that remain for our research already form a particular set of narratives. And, when it comes to those practices that can be read as “queer” in the way that I’ve described, often what we are left with are archival silences and absences, fragments and rumors. Instead, my strategy of reading for pleasure and accounting for the power of photographs is two-fold: first, I track my own pleasure in looking at these photographs, and second, I must imagine the pleasure within those photographs through the use of what Emma Pérez calls the “decolonial imaginary.”<sup>333</sup> The decolonial imaginary is an interstitial rupturing space, “the alternative to that which is written in history.”<sup>334</sup> In my use of the decolonial imaginary, I take the tropes surrounding U.S. immigration stories, Arab cultures, and the men, women and others who provided the material forces for those tropes, and I imagine other possibilities of what the archival traces they left behind might mean.

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332. Ibid.

333. Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*.

334. Ibid, 6-7.

Because these histories, this imaginary, and this research are not separate from me as the author, it is also essential that I analyze my relationship to the archive that I am studying and to the photographs that I am “reading.” I ask myself, does my interpretation of these photographs bolster my own sense of identity or purpose? Do they or would another interpretation challenge those things? What am I asking these photographs to do, and what does it mean for the subjects that they have immortalized in this visual form? I also consider what made me hesitate and pause on these photos while in the archives. It is important to acknowledge that, as I looked through these photographs, I *wanted* to find evidence of queer desires and intimacies in the early Arab American community. The only “evidence” I have had of queerness in this early history is in the form of rumor that circulates in my own family, a story that is framed by violence and exclusion.

My great-grandfather’s sexual encounters were not confined to his marriage. The evidence that my family and the larger Syrian community in Louisville had for this claim was that he was assaulted on more than one occasion, for reasons apparently related to his sexual behavior or desires. I have no way of knowing what was actually said and speculated at the time of his life, but by the time the rumor got to my generation, I was told that he was “bisexual” and that he was “beat up for cruising.” It is unclear how these assaults that my great-grandfather experienced came to pass. Did rumor of his non-normativity incur such attacks, or it was his attempts at sexual encounters with men that resulted in violence? Was it, perhaps, the race of the men he might have engaged sexually that brought him violence? Or was it his own precarious racial status? Did he have sexual encounters with other men in the Syrian community? Did he frequent a particular locale

that may have been associated with non-normative sexuality or that was heavily policed? In recent years, a younger family member approached someone at a local gathering whom he recognized as a Lebanese elder. He identified himself and told the man that my great-grandfather was his relative. The elder replied sharply, “he was a queer.” The life of the rumor continues. I have been told by family members that to continue the circulation of this rumor, as I am doing so now, is unfair to my ancestor, as he is not able to “defend himself” against the accusation. This, of course, assumes that his deviation from heterosexuality is a blight upon his memory—further evidence of the queer demons of the early Arab American community. What concerns me more, however, are the ways that both options—to circulate the rumor or to deny it—inscribe his life and memory within forms of violence. The former relegates his desires to the violent physical punishment those desires allegedly elicited and the latter disciplines them into heteronormativity.

These details of my ancestor’s life evoke many questions for me, but most of all I wondered what *pleasure* my great-grandfather may have experienced through his desires, if any. Thus, my entry into the archive was, in part, motivated by a desire to pursue pleasure and queerness in the early Arab American community. Despite this desire, I cannot name any of the individuals in the photographs I discuss as queer subjects, and I intentionally have chosen not to investigate their actual lives and identities beyond that which was readily available when looking at them. I decided against this because doing so would shift the focus back onto the impetus to name, categorize, and identify, a focus that, when trying to center erotics and intimacies in sites of social instability, is beside the

point. Regardless of the sexual affiliations of individual Arab Americans, the disciplinary regimes of heteronormativity affected, and continue to affect, the entire community. I will attempt here to “challenge my own desire for the usual archival material and the usual way of seeing, as well as honor that which women scholars before me have uncovered.”<sup>335</sup>

Patricia Holland writes that “snapshots contribute to the present-day historical consciousness in which our awareness of ourselves is embedded.”<sup>336</sup> As pictures that were part of a family collection, the photographs that I discuss in this chapter are part of the historical memory of that particular family. As images that were included in the Naff collection—photographs that were taken from the family album and placed in the ethnic archive—the images became part of the historical memory of the Arab American community. With that act, they are implicated in a larger narrative of assimilation and belonging and put to use for, perhaps, different purposes than within the family. But the relationship between the individual and the family, and between the individual and the community, does not dissipate with the transfer of images from the family album to the ethnic archive. By asking after my own relationship to these photographs and to this analysis, my intention here is to center the way that family photographs “can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and

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335. Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands,” 129.

336. Patricia Holland, “Introduction: History, Memory, and the Family Album,” *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, Eds. Patricia Holland and Jo Spence (London: Virago Press, 1991), 10.

personal unconscious.”<sup>337</sup>

## PHOTOGRAPHING ARABS, ARABS PHOTOGRAPHING

For Arabs, the context in which photography developed is different than in the United States, but the negotiations that Arabs have employed with and against the medium are similar to those of U.S. minoritized populations. This history of Arab engagement with photography is crucial for understanding Arab American engagement with photography, because of the sustained diasporic relationship between the two contexts. Photography first arrived in West Asia and North Africa via colonial practices: European and American anthropologists, missionaries, and government officials produced photographs of the landscape and of the indigenous inhabitants in ways that buttressed Orientalist ideas that Arabs were uncivilized and exotic. Photographs of Arabs either rendered them part of the land’s natural topography or highlighted their racial and cultural difference from Europeans and Euro-Americans. Sarah Graham-Brown writes that, in early Middle Eastern photography, “costume, particularly the costume of women, became a form of visual identification for Westerners of races, ‘types’ and ethnic groups, and contributed to the imagery of the picturesque, the exotic and the erotic.”<sup>338</sup> European mythology surrounding the head-covering and veiling of Arab women (of all religions) and the space of the “harem” as modes of patriarchal control was cast in contrast to the

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337. Ibid, 13-14.

338. Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 118.

supposed freedom of European women. European male sexual fantasy was central to this mythology, as veiling and “seclusion” within the harem blocked colonizer male access to Arab women’s bodies. Nudity, then, was also a prominent feature in early Western photography of Arabs, especially images of Arab women in various stages of undress.<sup>339</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, cameras became accessible to the Arab upper class through the production and circulation of the “press and shoot” Kodak cameras. These cameras were first available in the Ottoman Empire in 1888 and were mass-produced in simpler and cheaper form (the Brownie camera) beginning in 1900. These cameras greatly enabled family photography practices that did not rely upon the use of a formal studio and professional photographer. Photography thus emerged as a site through which the production of oppositional images was possible. Through photography, upper class Arabs laid claim to modernity, delineated national and class identities,<sup>340</sup> and resisted the orientalist framework that had been imposed upon them. Photography was configured as a medium “that would make visible the social aspirations of the family.”<sup>341</sup> Thus the visual portrayal of proper family structures, class status, and a

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339. Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). Alloula's classic work on postcards of such photographs intricately detailed how this sexual fantasy was central to Orientalism and colonialism.

340. Stephen Sheehi, “A Social History of Early Arab Photography, or a Prolegomenon to an Archaeology of the Lebanese Imago,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, 2 (2007): 177-208.

341. *Ibid.*, 191.

national Arab identity was central to these images.<sup>342</sup> As accessibility of the camera increased and families were able to take photographs themselves, rather than only in a formal studio, other domestic intimacies could be visualized. The portraiture that documented the respectability of the family continued to exist, alongside these newer forms of domestic, amateur photography.

In the Arab context, particularly toward the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the bourgeois family was the symbol of this modernity in portraiture. The bourgeois family portrayed the father as the “productive head” of the family and the mother as the “reproductive base.”<sup>343</sup> Often, fathers were shown standing in the photograph, while mothers and children would be seated, or positioned at a lower sight-level than the father. A *tarboush* (a type of men’s hat) signified that a man was educated and part of the Arab elite, while western clothing aligned the upper-class Arab family with “modernity.” Importantly, the bourgeois family portrait included only one set of parents and children, severing the full extent of Arab familial intimacies from the frame. The bourgeois family thus excluded grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins—“those who [were] peripheral to the modern vision of self and family.”<sup>344</sup> These portraits of the bourgeois family, however, did not simply replace representations of the extended family. For instance, some photographs in the Naff archives that appear to be of one set

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342. Ibid, 179. Sheehi writes specifically about Lebanese national identity. The articulation of a national identity (whether "Arab" or nation-state-specific) would have varied throughout Arab regions of the Ottoman empire.

343. Ibid, 193.

344. Ibid, 192.

of parents and their children actually represent relatives in the extended family, and not the donors of the picture themselves. This signaled the tension of this transition, from extended to bourgeois, in these portraits.

Arab Americans were thus exposed to photography and family portraiture through the West Asian and North African context, the U.S. context, and other Arab diasporic contexts (Canada, South America, Africa). Also, because of their widespread popularity in middle-class and aspiring middle-class American culture, Brownie cameras were likely sold through Syrian peddlers. In the Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American collection, the photographs have been donated by individual families, consisting largely of amateur images of family members and friends at work, home, or leisure. The later into the twentieth century the photographs go, the less visible the bourgeois family structure is. Rather, these later family portraits might be more accurately identified as modeling the “nuclear” family, showing the mother and father as one unit (though still gender-differentiated) and the children as the fruitful products of their labor. Julia Hirsch writes that this family photograph, whether formal or amateur, represents the family in three ways: “as a state whose ties are rooted in property; ... as a spiritual assembly which is based on moral values; and ... as a bond of feeling which stems from instinct and passion.”<sup>345</sup> Most often, Hirsch says, the father symbolizes the family as state and spiritual assembly and the mother as emotional bond.<sup>346</sup> Many of the family photographs

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345. Julia Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 15.

346. *Ibid.*, 15.

in the Naff archives, especially family portraits, fall into these representations of the bourgeois or nuclear family models, in which the family is bounded, unified, and properly reproductive. There were a few family photographs that exceed the bounds of the bourgeois or nuclear family, images that showed an entire, or extended, Arab family, grouped together on a beach or in a park. These photographs are fissures in the narrative of Arab American familial normalcy and gesture toward the affective ties of the Arab diaspora.

In order to understand how the photographs I have selected differ from other photographs in the Naff archive, I will show and discuss two images that were typical.<sup>347</sup> These two photographs exemplify the collection's emphasis on normative (i.e. bourgeois or nuclear) family structures and proper capitalist laboring practices within the early Arab American community. The first photo, figure 3, is of a Syrian family who were maternal relatives of the person who donated the photograph. The photo is undated, but the earliest it could have been taken is 1920. The nuclear family emerges in this image, with the father and mother seated at the same level and the two children nestled protectively between them. The backdrop indicates it is a studio portrait, a marker of middle-class status or middle-class aspiration. The clothing of the family, particularly the matching outfits of the children and their shoes, also point to financial well-being. This kind of portrait is a typical example of posed family portraits that are found in the Naff archive.

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347. All of the images of photographs provided in this chapter were taken while holding a hand-held camera. They do not represent the quality of the originals that are in the Naff Collection.

They represent the Arab American family as a productive unit, a corporation,<sup>348</sup> and its members as productive individuals, worthy of belonging in the national U.S. family.



Figure 3. Untitled, no date, Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 12, box 1, Families: Haney, (Haney, Nazha), circa 1920s-1983 Detroit, MI.

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348. Hirsch, *Family Photographs*, 32.



Figure 4. Untitled, no date, Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 12, box 1, Individual: Caldwell, Tom J., 1913-ca.1920s, Drumwright, OK.

The second photo that is representative of those found in the Naff collection, Figure 4, exemplifies the proper labor of Syrian immigrants. This is an image of the interior of Joseph Grocery & Meats, an Arab-owned store in Drumright, Oklahoma. The picture is dated “late teens or early twenties.” Pictured, from left to right, are Chic Fogaley; Henry Joseph, the proprietor; and George Elias. This is the image of the respectable Syrian American capitalist, the owner and operator of a business, one with a physical and permanent storefront. These photographs, through their explicit framing and staging, as well as through their inclusion in a national ethnic archive, enact an affective equation with white, middle-class Americans; they “[naturalize] claims of sameness through an appearance of familiarity.”<sup>349</sup> In the family portrait, the dark features of the

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349. Wendy Kozol, “Relocating Citizenship in Photographs of Japanese Americans during World War II,” *Haunting Violations: Feminist Criticism and the Crisis*

family (the hair and eyes, and the skin tone of the daughter) are the only things that might threaten this sense of familiarity. In the workplace photograph, taken from a more distanced vantage point, there is nothing, visibly, that would indicate a deviation from white American masculinity. Understood in this way, these photographs are building blocks of the Arab American inclusion narrative—that Arab Americans are, and have been, worthy of belonging in the American national family.

### FINDING PLEASURE IN LOOKING

If we have inherited a colonial white heteronormative way of seeing and knowing, then we must retrain ourselves to confront and rearrange a mind-set that privileges certain relationships. —Emma Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenges of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard”<sup>350</sup>

All three of the photographs that follow here were provided by the same person, named Nazha. Nazha appears in one of the photographs with her cousin. Nazha’s husband, Daher, is present in one of the photographs and may also be present in a second image. Two additional men are also present: one is labeled as a “friend” of Daher, and the relationship between the two men in the second photo is not named. Where available, I note the approximate dates and locations of the images. When a date is not known, I give the earliest date possible of the photographs as marked in the archival collection (i.e. “circa 1920s”). The first two photographs I discuss together, as I see those discussions as

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*of the “Real,”* Eds. Wendy S. Hesford and Wendy Kozol (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 231.

350. Pérez, “Queering the Borderlands,” 124.

complementary. The last photograph I address separately. This also allows me to discuss the gendered dynamics of intimacy between men and between women separately. Given the relationships *known* about some of the people in these photographs, I use Emma Perez’s caution in the epigraph above, to “confront and rearrange” the privileging of certain relationships (and our assumptions about those relationships), and to imagine other possibilities stemming from the intimacies created in these images.



Figure 5. Untitled, early 1920s, Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 12, box 1, Families: Haney, (Haney, Nazha), circa 1920s-1983.



Figure 6. Untitled, 1925, Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 12, box 1, Families: Haney, (Haney, Nazha).

The first photograph, figure 5, was dated in the early 1920s and shows Daher and another man named Khalil. A notation on the back of the photo tells us that the two men are “friends and fellow peddlers of oriental rugs and imported laces and linens singing in Ottowa[, Illinois].” That they are “friends” tells us that their bond is intentional, willing, and non-familial. The indication that they are “fellow peddlers” may mean that they peddle together, perhaps procuring items from the same supplier, dividing up routes, and providing mutual protection and companionship on the road. The two men sit together, gesturing and laughing, but the notation indicates that they are singing. Wedding rings are visible on each man’s left hand and in the far right edge of the frame lie two hats,

ostensibly belonging to the subjects of the photograph. In the focal point of the image, the men's postures are animated and their gazes are fixated on the book that one of the men holds, rather than being directed at the camera. This suggests that this is a candid shot. However, the synchronicity of their poses—the right arm of each man bent at the same angle, their index fingers pointed simultaneously in exclamation—could indicate that the photograph is staged or could simply point to rhythmic movements that accompanied their singing. But the bottom half of the photograph may tell a different story. One man's leg is draped over the other's, as if he is approaching sitting on the lap of his friend. And somewhat obscured at the top of the photo, we can make out the image of this same man's arm wrapped around the body of his friend, and his hand is curled into his friend's hair. The man executing this embrace is in the midst of a grin, his eyes nearing shut, while the second man's mouth is open, carrying the song. Their closeness resembles a "frontier homosociality," the ease and casual intimacy born by the sharing of domestic and leisure responsibilities in the absence of women.<sup>351</sup>

The second photograph, figure 6, pictures two men, who are listed on the back as George and Dell, with "Daher" in parentheses under Dell's name—it is unclear whether it could be the same Daher that appears in both photographs, as none of the men seem to resemble each other. The picture is undated but indicates that it was taken in Canton, Ohio. Based on the time frame indicated for these pictures in the archive, the earliest it could have been taken is the early 1920s. What I notice first about this photograph is the

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351. Glen M. Mimura, "A Dying West? Reimagining the Frontier in Frank Matura's Photography, 1903-1913," *American Quarterly*, 62, 3, (2010), 708.

way that their figures dominate and fill the frame. We can see that they are outdoors, in front of a house, and their positions indicate a candid nature—the uneven height of the two men as they are placed in the frame, the movement of the one man’s arm upward or downward, the grasp of the other man’s arm around the shoulders of his fellow peddler. But what strikes me about this photograph is the intimacy it also relays. The close proximity of their bodies—they are literally pressed against one another—suggests an unclear delineation between where one man’s body ends and another begins. The gaze of both men is direct toward the photographer, as if they have been interrupted. While the tone of the first photograph is jovial and flirtatious, the enmeshed bodies and intense stares of the second photograph suggest a more serious tone.

As I look at these photographs, I imagine what it might feel like, in my own body, to be in such proximity to someone else, a friend, a family member, a lover. I imagine the feel of a loved one’s hair curled in my fingers, the quickened pulse and vibrations from singing in unison, the warmth generated from the movement of two bodies, from the length of our bodies joined together. I am grateful for my companion, for someone to be at ease with after a week of walking and selling, of separation.

Once this past week, I feared for my life, when the husband of a customer took offense at something I did—I’m not sure what—and got his shotgun. This was not the first time, but it does not get easier with repetition. You were too far away to intervene, but you heard the commotion. Although my cheeks were burning from embarrassment and anger at these people who are so quick to assume the worst from us, I was able to ignore those feelings and feign humble apology to diffuse the situation. For hours after, I

thought I would break down, but your hand on my back steadied me as we walked, reminded me that I was not alone in this life. I cannot tell my wife; she has too much to worry about while I'm gone, but at least there is someone who understands me without having to speak about it. For you, I am grateful.

Finally out of danger and off duty, here, we take off our jackets, worn so that customers see that we are respectable salesmen, so that wives and daughters do not fear us strangers. Here we take off our hats, worn again for professional appearance, but really more as shade from the sun overhead. Soon, ties will be loosened, sleeves rolled up, and perhaps belts unbuckled, if the dinner meal is abundant. Soon we will tend to our families, to our wives, but for now the time is just ours, for joy and rest with someone who knows what my every day is like.



Figure 7. Untitled, 1925, Faris and Yamna Naff Arab-American Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Series 12, box 1, Families: Haney, (Haney, Nazha)

The final photo, figure 7, is also taken in Canton, Ohio, of Nazha and Budelia, or “Bud,” in 1925. The relationship between Nazha and Bud is known, in one sense: they are cousins. This fact neither substantiates nor invalidates any claim of erotics or intimacy between them. First, although we know the familial relation between them, we do not know the substance of that relationship. Second, intimate and sexual connections between cousins were common, particularly through the endogamous marriage system,

“cousin marriage,” that was prevalent in Syrian Christian communities.<sup>352</sup> Also set outdoors like the first two photographs, this photo is clearly staged, more so in contrast to the first two. The woodwork and trellises on the houses in this and the second photo, as well as the same date and location, may indicate that they are also the same house. There is a great distance between the photographer and the women who are the subjects of the photograph. At first glance, they are diminutive, overshadowed by the image of the house behind them and sent to the background by the expanse of lawn in front of them. But their poses are aggressive in the frame, as if they have made themselves take up more space to compensate for their smallness in the photograph itself. One woman juts her leg out from behind the bushes, extending long and angled out from her body, and the other woman is lounging her arm upward against the trellis, above her companion. They gaze directly at the camera, but each in ways that subtly mitigates that directness. The woman on the right has turned her face toward the side, while still keeping her eyes toward the camera’s lens. The woman on the left faces the camera completely, but angles her head downward, in a move that feigns a kind of coyness, but one which her eyes betray. The most intriguing thing about this photograph is the way that the women are partially hidden by the foliage around them, as if to keep something from the camera’s eye. As if to suggest that there is something for themselves, between themselves, that they have deemed beyond the view of this photographic gaze. The distance between them and the

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352. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 169. For some, choosing a marriage partner from within the same religion was more important than continuing to marry from within the Syrian community.

photographer also achieves this. Their stances and gazes, particularly for the woman on the left, are assertive; the tilts of their heads acknowledge the norms of decorum that they are supposed to uphold as women; the position behind the bushes defiantly blocks the complete access of the photographic (and audience's) gaze. This interruption of the gaze both invites curiosity and speculation—*my* curiosity and speculation—and refuses any full knowing. The photograph forces me, as a desiring consumer of the photographic image and as an Arab American scholar of Arab American history, to grapple with the unknown and the unknowable.

I read these photographs of Syrians who participated in the peddling economy in order to imagine the intimate bonds that were created through the migratory experiences of peddling and the relationship of the rest of the family members to peddling activities and networks. And specifically, I see each of these images as providing an archival trace of the homosociality and homoeroticism of Syrian migrant peddling communities. As gender-segregated images of Arabs, it is also possible to read these images in a way that reinforces the Orientalist stereotypes of heterosexism and patriarchal norms in Arab cultures. And yet, doing so forecloses the reality—not just the possibility—that these gender-segregated spaces were *also* homosocial and homoerotic spaces that were constitutive of Arab American identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is pleasure in my relationship to these photographs—to knowing that they cannot be fully consumed by heteronormativity and even that their apparent normativity *enables* my pleasure. This pleasure is in imagining the homoerotics and homosociality between the photographs' subjects, as well as in knowing that those

intimacies can never be fully eradicated from the archive.

There is also a danger in this analysis and this imagining, which is not necessarily its homoerotic subversiveness. The danger lies in the central problematic of the photograph itself: the naturalized relationship between the photograph and the “real” thing or person it displays. This relationship persists stubbornly in the face of the many attempts to sever it. Thinking about what I desire to do with these photographs and what I tried to do even *against* that desire, my direct reference of them, and the archive in which they reside, will always call us back to wondering about “the real”: the “real” identities of the subjects within, the “real” relationships between them, the “real” desires, dreams, and fears that their lives contained. Despite this nagging desire for once-and-for-all answers to questions of who, what, when, where, and how, we must also come to terms with the finite and ultimate limits of the archive. The archive will never contain all of the answers we, as historians, as community members, seek. The answers the archives do provide are necessary, but will not alone lead us to decolonizing our history or our present selves. As historians, we might take our cue here from artists. Activist, artist, and visionary Ricardo Levins Morales articulates the powerful link between the creative (used in this chapter as “imagining”) and liberation: “Dreams are wells that tap into the deep aquifers of our being... The arts are the collective dream-life of a people. In dreams and art there are no natural constraints so they inevitably raise uncomfortable topics. That’s why dictatorships always want to control or suppress the arts. It’s as close as they can get to controlling

dreams.”<sup>353</sup> We must open the seeking we do in the archive to the creative and the imaginary—the very sources of power and vision that white supremacy has sought to destroy.

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353. Ricardo Levins Morales, “Community Art as Medicinal Practice: Talk Given at the Network of Ensemble Theaters’ National Ensemble Summit, August, 2011, Minneapolis,” (2011), 3.

## Conclusion

The reality is not so much one of rupture—of Syrians going from being white to being people of color—as it is one of continuity with past patterns of racialization. To be sure, there were ebbs and flows in this process, but the not-quite-white status of Syrians lived on. In other words, Syrian encounters with race in the early part of the twentieth century formed the foundation upon which later Arab immigrants were marked as different and potentially threatening to the body politic. —Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*<sup>354</sup>

Peddling is both the subject of this dissertation as well as my method. Peddling in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Arab America was a practice of knowledge production, negotiation, and sales, and it was intensely creative. Peddlers who used stories to grab the attention of their customers—whether those stories were about the merchandise or the peddler herself—were more likely to make a sale and gain a repeat customer. Those with limited English had to be even more creative in order to communicate with customers. The knowledge in this dissertation too has been produced, negotiated, and, in some way, sold. Syrian peddlers were regulated through the popular representations that both warned of Syrian men and illustrated their allure, through the disciplining of Arab women and their families, and through the work of Arab American historians to recuperate peddling practices in the service of the Arab American community. The records of these regulations remain visible and allow us to retrace the reasons *why* peddlers themselves and, later, narratives about peddling were to be so carefully managed. The transience of peddling (and its associations with sexual deviance), the significant numbers of female Syrian peddlers, and the detachment of

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354. Ibid, 167.

peddlers from their home communities stoked white American anxieties about race, settler colonialism, gender, class, and sexuality. The chapters of this dissertation began with and have ended with the concept of possibility. In focusing on the knowledge produced about Syrian peddlers and the Syrian peddling economy, as well as the methods used to produce such knowledge, I hope to open a space of possibility for Arab American studies, so that we can re-examine how history functions in the field and guide our historical scholarship to support the liberatory transformation of Arab American communities today.

In this dissertation, I have attempted to cultivate a space of articulation and imagining that claims this history of assimilation and racial “inbetweenness” as part of Arab American studies. What happens after a population or particular generation has been deemed assimilated? Is that group then lost to ethnic studies? In particular, as the early period of Arab immigration to the United States is implicitly framed as having been absorbed into whiteness, does that make this population no longer a subject of Arab American studies? What would it mean to see this group of people as continuing to be part of Arab American studies inquiries, long after assimilation has supposedly finished its job? Even if we think of ethnic studies fields as being structured by particular critiques or modes of critique, rather than only by objects of study, what would Arab American studies look like if it took the history, process, and population of assimilation into account? I believe that to ‘give up’ this population is also to give in to the inevitability and finality of assimilation and, importantly, the supremacy of whiteness in absorbing particular communities and histories to its own benefit. Ignoring this population also

upholds a false binary between those who are “assimilated” and those who are “authentic.”

Growing up in a large and extended Lebanese American family in Kentucky, I learned bits and pieces about our history in the United States and even less about our history in Lebanon. As a child, my great-grandmother Jaleelah (or simply *sittu* as her grandchildren and great-grandchildren called her) would tell stories about her village in the mountains of Lebanon, the scarlet fever that took her father’s life and threatened her own, and her reluctance to give up an education and marry to lessen the financial burden on her family. Not understanding the significance of these stories, I was often bored by their content, but I was enthralled with her speech, especially when she spoke on the phone in Arabic and in the accent of her English words. My *sittu*, who left Mount Lebanon in 1914 at the age of 16, was the only immigrant in my immediate family during my youth and she embodied the earliest idea of difference that I can remember. She was unquestionably mine as I was hers, and yet I know that her foreignness to me marked our interactions.

Jaleelah was known for her stubbornness and independence, someone who, in many ways, contradicted what was otherwise communicated to me about expected womanhood. My great grandmother was perhaps the most strident personality in my family. Long deceased, she may still hold that title. In my memory, when I think of her stubbornness, I always remember her at 90 years old, just a couple of years before her death, in which she insisted on walking down the back stairwell outside her house without any assistance. She was as unyielding as the concrete underneath her feet. Her

husband, who died before I was born, was contrasted as the “weaker” personality. He was often described with derision, as someone who could not stand up to his wife. In fact, the personality difference between the two of them has become a parable for the dangers of women with “strong personalities” pushing around the men of the family.

As I sought to understand where my family came from and, specifically, how we thought of ourselves racially and culturally, the idea of assimilation framed this understanding. In my family, we tended to uphold and maintain “Lebanese” as part of our identity while simultaneously diminishing that claim by acknowledging our assimilation—we weren’t “real” Lebanese, we were “watered down,” etc. This contradiction has manifested itself in innumerable instances throughout my life, and, importantly, it continues today despite my certainty that “I am Arab,” “I am Lebanese.” One example of this contradiction illustrates the limits of the archive, as well as a way we could envision a different kind of archive of historical knowledge. This example centers on the body, and it illuminates the way that assimilation is an embodied process, even though it is rarely described or analyzed as such.

As a young female-bodied girl in a body-conscious world, I was obsessed with other people’s bodies and my own body’s stubborn inability to look like theirs. Specifically, I was focused on the bodies of white girls and I compared myself to them, as I also saw myself as a “white girl.” I remember feeling ashamed of my body—especially after my mother told me at the age of 10 that it was time for me to start shaving my legs. I began to think about the hair on my arms and considered shaving them as well. My baggy shirts were an attempt to camouflage the protrusion of my butt into the space of the

world. As ages progressed and pants got tighter, I remember noticing how the thighs of the white girls around me didn't touch when they walked. I was amazed! This was not the case with most of the women in my family. I was mortified to see a profile of my face, preferring to keep the contours of my nose less accentuated. Femininity was something I did not think I could claim, did not think I could *achieve*. It was a lesson at a young age in the constructed nature of gender and the labor (whether welcomed or not) we put into those gendered presentations of ourselves. As a young girl, despite my appearance as white, rather *because* of that privilege, I did not have a language to understand just what this difference was that I saw in myself.

In my adulthood, I began to understand the ways that these moments of difference and, in my mind inferiority, prevented me from accepting the femme gender identity and the queer sexuality that I felt. I also talked more about these things with my Lebanese American mother. She was shocked to hear about the focus of my self-consciousness, as she revealed that, throughout her childhood, she was teased for the very same things: for being “fat” (specifically for having large thighs and butt, which were the same areas of scrutiny for me), for her body hair, and for her big (read: Arab) nose. And importantly, as I began to also question the roots of the racial identity that I grew up with, I found a language for articulating this knowledge of difference about my own body. This was a difference around body size and fatness, certainly, but also a difference from the white normative female body in racialized ways—ways that I could identify in my Arab family members, particularly the women. I am struck that despite the links between the racialized body-consciousness of my mother and myself, I never saw this as a part of my

Lebanese self growing up—and yet, I knew it was a difference, a deviation from the “ideal” that had been passed down among Arab women in my family through the policing of our bodies and our genders.

This is contradictory knowledge—of knowing, but not knowing—that is intimately linked with Arab American racialization and with racial “inbetweenness.” More precisely, it is a knowledge of the body, corporeal knowledge, that my intellect has been trained to ignore or question. As an adult, I have found that my body confronts a failure to fully inhabit both dominant and resistant spaces that are defined by race, gender, and sexual identity. I cannot fully belong in white or people of color spaces; my fatness, queerness, and racial inbetweenness intervenes in my presence in “women” spaces; and my femininity interrupts the supposed cohesion of lesbian or queer spaces. As I reflect on these experiences, I am convinced that this is further evidence of the impossibility of assimilation as a process of finality in my body.<sup>355</sup> It also demonstrates that the body, itself, is an archive, a source of historical meaning and a potential site of transformation. This latter point is significant. If, as feminist scholars, we aim for our scholarship to work against the structures of domination that we study, structures in which we are implicated, then how can liberatory transformation happen without engaging the body itself? How can it happen without engaging *our own bodies*? This dissertation is an attempt at engaging the Arab American body generally and my body

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355. I am not equating the limits of belonging I experience in any of these spaces with those of people who are positioned firmly outside a dominant space (for example, a darker-skinned person of color in a white space, a trans woman in a “women’s” space, a lesbian in a heterosexual space).

specifically in the course of historical analysis. This is a practice of articulation and imagining, an exercise in ontological healing—from whiteness, from being both the target and the agent of white supremacy, from essentialized racial categories, from the sexual hegemonies of ethnic studies, from the racial ones of queer theory and women’s studies, and from assimilation itself.

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