Historical Fiction of the Lebanese in Early 20th century North America: Rabih Jaber’s America

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This presentation will offer a reading of the latest novel in Arabic by Lebanese writer Rabih Jaber, America (اميركا, May 2009). In this novel Jaber builds on the stylistic and narrative accomplishments of his important historical trilogy about Ottoman Beirut (بيروت: مدينة العالم، 2003-06). In America, Jaber explores his penchant for the historical archive by chronicling the aftermath of the Great War for the peoples of Lebanese origin. Written in 126 short chapters, America explores the construction of the identity of a group inseparable from the 20th century Lebanese history: the immigrants to North America, and in particular, the huge wave of 1913-14. The power of that archive (Darraj), refracted through the lenses of a highly inventive literary imagination, offers the reader an intricate re-narration of the competing narratives of Lebanese immigrants making a life in a moment of economic and social upheaval. The presentation will make the argument that novelistic form is not so much the container holding historical data, as it is a fictional extension of archives, orchestrated by a complex narrative voice. The presentation will give some examples of the telescopic gestures in both time (Salibi) and space which structure this shared history of difficult times for both the U.S. and Lebanon. As Jaber has never been translated despite the fact that he has written sixteen novels, the paper will end with reflections on the potential exportability of the historical novel for a larger consumption, beyond local, Arab World or diasporic communities.