Arab America Obscura: The Racial Intimacies of Working Class Syrian Migrants in the Early 20th Century

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This presentation will illuminate the ways that norms of gender, sexual behavior, religious identity and class expectations work in tandem with ideas about race to produce the discourse in which working class Syrian immigrants in the early 20th century United States were understood by the particular social work apparatus of “International Institutes”. These agencies, located all over the United States, were created to address the needs of new immigrants and to facilitate “Americanization”. The many case files of Syrian immigrants in these institutions chronicle intimate interactions between social workers and working class Syrians concerning unemployment, immigration and naturalization issues, domestic and family violence, and illness. But more importantly, using these case files both as primary sources and as historical narratives in their own right allows for a reading of working class Syrian immigrant lives that also centers the epistemological contours of historical research. While I do use historical methods to understand these documents, I will also use creative writing to explore that which may be elided by the lens of the social worker and the format of the case file. In other words, this presentation aims to question what kinds of meaning can be made from reading these documents and to ask, in the words of Emma Perez, where the “interstitial moments” are of early Arab American history—those moments that have not been and cannot be studied through traditional historical methods only.

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1 Early Arab migrants were from the Ottoman Province of Greater Syria. I use the term “Syrian” to refer to these migrants, as that is how they often referred to themselves before the creation of this region’s nation-states.