The American Lives of Ras Beirut

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Long identified as a multi-confessional, multi-cultural community, Ras Beirut is a place born of the shifting borders of a transnational history. In its affiliation with the Syrian Protestant College/American University of Beirut (SPC/AUB), the Anglo-American community was one of Ras Beirut’s most rooted communities. This presentation examines the everyday life of that tightly knit community in the first third of the 20th century and how it viewed itself within the confines of its socio-cultural milieu in relation to its immediate surroundings at a pivotal moment in the regional transformation from empire to nation state. Vividly conveyed though the epistolary narrative of Charlotte Allen Ward, wife of Dr. Edwin St. John Ward, Professor and Dean of the SPC/AUB’s School of Medicine (1911-1931), this Ras Beirut story is also part of the larger narrative of the adaptation and exchange of the New England born American missionary movement and its transnational, transcultural history of “reciprocal impact” (Heather Sharkey). Whether viewed as cultural imperialists or cultural path-breakers, these American missionaries traversed space, time, and culture, concomitantly shifting the borders of their field between memory and history, image and reality, and us versus them subjectivities. As a part of American history, this presentation is situated in the current transnational movement in historical scholarship that emphasizes America in the world rather than America and the world. Its contribution at once counters misperceptions of inherent cross-cultural enmity and historicizes a cross-cultural encounter by way of more than a century of an American presence in Beirut. Moreover, this project is situated within a scholarly domain that understands America and the MENA as having a long, inextricable, mutually reinforcing and rewarding history underscoring the often-obscured reality that “nations lie enmeshed in each others’ history” (Daniel T. Rodgers).