# *Letters to Uncle Sam*:

# Ameen Rihani and The American *Mahjar*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

"Since April 1917 the complex consciousness and psychology of your adopted son, have changed completely…this attitude toward the household among whom for twenty years he lived and played and walked in his dreams. I have torn up my birth certificate, Uncle, and turned my back on all the moralists of Arabia."

– Ameen Rihani, *Letters to Uncle Sam, 1917*[1]

Intense change and uncertainty pervaded the lives of Syrians living in Greater Syria and the *mahjar,* the place of emigration*,* during World War I.[2] Active warfare, the collapsing Ottoman Empire, and looming European encroachment preoccupied Syrians living in the homeland and the diaspora. Globally, the wartime period was filled with tension and hardship. In Greater Syria, fighting, starvation, mandated conscription, and economic upheaval impacted day-to-day life. Syrian migrants concentrated in the Americas, many of whom had migrated to the U.S. prior to the war, built lives in geographically disparate locations while attentive to the happenings of the homeland. The *mahjar* followed homeland developments and worried about family and village while navigating the waters of nativism, racism, revolutions, and political contexts of the country of residence.[3] One thread that wove Syrian migrants together was shared investment in the future of the Syrian nation. While the Ottoman Empire wavered and Arab nationalism grew, Syrians saw the potentialities of crafting a homeland. The activities of the Syrian *mahjar* illuminate that a nation is not bound to geographic confines, but built by the actions and sentiment of its people.

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[1] Ameen Rihani, *Letters to Uncle Sam* (Washington, DC: Platform International, 2001), 12.

[2] *Mahjar*: مَهْجَر (noun) place of emigration, retreat, refuge, sanctuary; emigration; settlement, colony. *Mahjari*. The noun of place derived from the three letter root هَجَرَ which means to emigrate. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th ed. (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1994), 1016. *Mahjari* - مهجري (Adj) Of or pertaining to the *Mahjar*. "*Mahjari*," *WordSense Online Dictionary*, accessed January 19, 2025, https://www.wordsense.eu/Mahjari/.

[3] See Chapter 2 for the different ways race, racial hierarchies, and differences were categorized in Greater Syria.

In the *mahjar*, local context intersected with home country attachment in political organizing. The distinct social and political atmospheres of New York and Mexico influenced the branding and structure of political associations and advocacy groups as well as central campaign points. In spite of differences and distance, communication amongst *mahjar* communities was constant — facilitated by the Arabic press, trade routes, and home country and familial connections. Ameen Fares Rihani provides a lens to analyze the bonds between the New York and Mexican *mahjar* communities in *Letters to Uncle Sam (1917-1919*). Rihani's account of collaboration and exchange presents an opportunity to analyze how the U.S., Rihani's adopted home country, and its localized ideas on racial hierarchies and national identity impacted Syrian political imaginaries.

This thesis breaks down *Letters to Uncle Sam,* documenting Rihani's actual mobilizing journey while parsing through the implications of his narrative style. Contextualizing Rihani's self-representation, affiliations, and engagements, the thesis endeavors to contribute to discourse on race and Syrian political organizing during World War I. Specifically, this study explores the centrality of citizenship and whiteness in Rihani's political strategy.

**Locating the Syrian Mahjar:**

Mobility and migration were integral to the societal fabric of the Ottoman Empire, including the Arabic-speaking territory of *Bilad al-Sham*, or Greater Syria, a territory roughly bound by the Mediterranean Sea and Syrian Desert that was under Ottoman rule from 1516 to 1922. Since the 18th century, migrants from Greater Syria began forming *mahjar* communities: *mahjar*, an Arabic word meaning "place of migration" or "diaspora," refers to emigrant or migrant communities. Syrian is often the ethnic descriptor of migrants coming during the first wave of migration between 1880-1924, as it was a term used by local inhabitants of the region to

describe the geographic territory.[4] The earliest of these communities emerged within other regions of the Ottoman Empire, concentrated along the Eastern Mediterranean. One notable hub was Cairo, Egypt, which grew into a center of political activism and journalism by the late 19th century.[5]

At the turn of the 20th century, while established communities persisted, Ottoman reforms, French imperial pursuits, and the expansion of a "capitalist world economy" led to new migration trajectories. The most popular route was to *Amirka*, an abstract term to refer to North and South America. Between 1880-1924, an estimated one-third of the population of the *Mutassarifate* of Mount Lebanon and the *vilayet* of Greater Syria set off seeking economic amelioration — often anticipating a temporary sojourn to accumulate wealth and then return home.[6] However, for some, temporary stays turned into lifetimes abroad. With emigration, distant and isolated settlements became outposts of the Syrian community, connections welded by return visits, chain migration, and cultural identity.[7]

**Historiography of Mahjar Studies :**

The field of *mahjar* studies examines the lives and communities of Syrian migrants abroad. Literature on the Syrian diaspora has evolved over the last century along with the field of ethnic, diaspora, Arab American, and Middle Eastern Studies. This literature review will provide an overview of *mahjar* scholarship at large and on Ameen Rihani specifically, tracing the broader

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[4] Leila Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xiv. Though Syrian and Lebanese are often used interchangeably and in conjunction with each other, Lebanese was not in popular parlance until the 1920s with the rise of the Lebanese national project and the establishment of the French mandates. Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 2.

[5] Linda Jacobs, *Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony of New York City, 1880–1900* (New York: Kalimah Press, 2015), 262. Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi, eds., *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 5.; Nijmeh Hajjar, *The Politics and Poetics of Ameen Rihani: The Humanist Ideology of an Arab-American Intellectual and Activist* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2010), 27.

[6] Naff, *Becoming American*, 13.

[7] Sarah M.A. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press), 29. Hourani and Shehadi, *The Lebanese in the World, 6*. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 12.

scholarship from its roots in a "celebratory tradition of immigration studies" toward a transnational and critical race approach.[8]

Over the past century, scholarly discourse on the *mahjar*, immigrant assimilation, integration, and discrimination have evolved in response to varying political, social, and academic landscapes in the United States and Mexico. Comparing early literature to scholarship published in the last twenty years shows a major alteration in discourse on race and whiteness — amending tales of easy integration into whiteness to critical discourse that interrogates the role of race in the Syrian experience in America and its domestic and international implications.[9] Much of the critical scholarship on race came after mounting waves of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hate in connection with American foreign policy towards Palestine after the first Intifada in 1987 and the 9/11 attacks. Both were key in the racialization of Arab Muslims. These key events sparked academic intrigue in the past and present.[10]

Early scholarship on Syrians in the United States was produced amidst massive anti-immigrant sentiment and often reflected assimilationist ideas. The 1790 Naturalization Act restricted citizenship to "free white persons" and the criterion for eligibility was not expanded until 1870 "to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent."[11] As a result, legislative efforts to restrict immigration and citizenship increasingly focused on defining racial boundaries and continuing the construction of whiteness.[12] For Syrians, whiteness remained contested, fluctuating in court decisions of the racial prerequisite cases between 1909 and 1915. Syrians ability to naturalize was challenged because some deemed them to be Asiatic and thus

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[8] Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 9.
[9] Ibid, 16. See Gualtieri's discussion of white supremacist ideologies and the intersection with Lebanese nationalism.
[10] Ibid, 10.
[11] U.S. Congress, *An Act to Amend the Naturalization Laws and to Punish Crimes against the Same, and for Other Purposes*, 41st Cong., 2nd sess., chap. 254, 16 Stat. 254 (1870).
[12] Matthew Wills, "How 'Prerequisite Cases' Tried to Define Whiteness - JSTOR DAILY," JSTOR Daily, 2020, https://daily.jstor.org/how-prerequisite-cases-tried-to-define-whiteness/.

ineligible for citizenship.[13] The cases of *In re Najour* (1909) and *Dow v. United States* (1915) ruled Syrians were legally white. Though, legal categorization as white did not translate into full acceptance, or equal stature with other groups classified as white.

Studying the prerequisite cases shows that they were fundamental in constructing American ideas on race. Mai Ngai's *Impossible Subjects* and Ian Haney-Lopez's *White by Law* discuss how immigration law contributed to the construction of racial categories. Court cases and federal laws enforced differences based upon a central dichotomy between "white people" and others. The process of legislating whiteness showed how whiteness was not a biological category but one invented and shaped by politics and society. Ngai and Lopez look at how different European ethnic groups grew to become included in whiteness, and how within whiteness there was still hierarchy where Americans of European origin were situated as superior against a hierarchy of racialized "Others."[14] The material benefits associated with whiteness in America encouraged assumption of racialized logics and motivated narratives promoting ethnic groups association with civilization and modernity. There was an incentive to write a discourse that would imbue whiteness onto Syrians.

**Literature Review:**

Phillip K. Hitti's *The Syrians in America* (1924) is a key early study of the Syrian diaspora in the United States. Hitti's writing demonstrates the impact of American nativism and the pursuit of whiteness as a gateway to citizenship, acceptance, and privilege. A renowned Arabist and head of Princeton University's Department of Oriental and Arabic Studies, Hitti

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[13] Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 65-89.

[14] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 37; Ian Haney-López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 91–98.The Other" is a term Edward Said uses to describe the dynamic of domination, restructuring, and authority the West (Occident) exerts over its constructed image of the East (Orient). I use Said's framework to highlight the intent to subjugate and how immigrants were measured against groups deemed more deserving of domination. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1–28.

examined the historical origins, migration patterns, and composition of the "200,000 Syrians, foreign-born and born of Syrian parents in the United States."[15] Hitti actively framed Syrians as upwardly mobile, Christian, law-abiding, and assimilated to Protestant family values, deliberately contrasting them with "undesirable" immigrant groups and the so-called despotic "Turks."[16] As such, Hitti reified logics that won Syrian the legal classification as white since 1915. Writing after the passing of the Johnson-Reed Act, or the Immigration Act of 1924 which limited the number of immigrants allowed entry based on national origins quota, Hitti reinforced the narrative that Syrians "preferred to become citizens, speak English, and be treated as individuals, shunning community life and ethnic institutions."[17] His history functioned within the framework of American discriminatory values, emphasizing loyalty and cultural contributions to counter discrimination and disparaging perceptions of Syrians.[18] Hitti's writing offers details on Syrians throughout the United States as well as illustrating the way political factors intersect with history writing.

Alixa Naff's *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (1985) was a seminal work, marking early interest in the Syrian diaspora. Traveling solo across the U.S. in her Volkswagen bus, Naff collected hundreds of oral histories from Syrian immigrants and their children bringing to light stories previously absent from mainstream narratives. Naff divides the migration and assimilation experience as a transition from "pioneer to peddler," noting that after migration reached its peak in 1913, Syrians joined the "American middle class and became willing subjects of the Americanization process."[19] Additionally, Naff emphasized sectarian divisions stating that "Although Arabs, including Syrians, share a common language, tradition,

[15] Hitti, Phillip, *The Syrians in America* (1924), 65.
[16] For form information and analysis of Protestant values and the Syrian community see Akram Khater's *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920*
[17] For more information on immigration law of 1924 see: Ngai, *Impossible Subjects,* 2004.
[18] Younis and Kayal, *The Coming of the Arabic Speaking Peoples to the United States*, 1995, ix.
[19] Naff, *Becoming American*, 12.

cultural traits, and values, their national identity is refracted primarily through the prism of religion."[20] Thus, Naff explained a lack of solidarity within the Syrian community based on divisions based on religious affiliation. Naff's claims about a straight trajectory of assimilation, easy absorption into whiteness, and prominence of division fall have since been challenged. However, Naff's contributions to Arab American studies remain essential as she created an invaluable repository of first-hand migrant accounts that continue to be the basis of present day analyses. Along with Naff, Michael Suleiman, and Adele Younis's research, created much of the archival resources that lay the groundwork for subsequent scholars.

The growth of ethnic studies, transnationalism, and post-colonial theory between the 1970s and 1990s spurred efforts to study diaspora. Ethnic studies rising from the civil rights movement and student struggles to include marginalized racial and ethnic histories. Simultaneously, scholars of transnationalism responded to globalization and challenged nation-based analyses of migration. Post-colonial theory, sparked by the wave of decolonization drew attention to the enduring cultural and epistemological legacies of empire and colonialism.These fields converged to destabilize normalized notions of citizenship and belonging. [21]

In *The Lebanese in the World* (1990), editors Albert Hourani and Nadim Shehadi compiled papers submitted to a conference on Lebanese emigration organized by the Centre for Lebanese Studies in Oxford. The volume offers a comparative study of Lebanese enclaves, examining how communities adapted while maintaining ties to their homeland. In the

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[20] Ibid, 16.

[21] For more on the burgeoning field of Ethnic Studies see: Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993). for Transnationalism:Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 645, no. 1 (1992): 1–24. For: Post-colonial theory, see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

introduction, Hourani explores how identity and the home-country connection remained strong enough to foment political organizing on its behalf, noting that at "moments of political crisis, there might emerge general organizations of all those for whom their Syrian or Lebanese origin had a meaning: during the First World War, for example, news of the famine in Lebanon aroused worldwide concern and led to the creation of relief committees."[22] This compendium is a foundational work that shows how emigrants' connections to the homeland manifested in collective action, in contrast to prior scholarship that emphasized assimilation and loss of connection to the homeland.[23]

In *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920 (2001)*, Akram Khater takes a transnational approach to studying Lebanese migration, bringing to light the centrality of return and circular migration, the former meaning return to Lebanon after accumulating wealth and the latter repeatedly moving between home country and host country, along the lines of seasonal laboring. These patterns shaped material and ideological ties between the United States and Mount Lebanon, reinforcing the lasting ties between *mahjar* communities and the homeland. Looking at the commonality of both return visits and permanent return, Khater highlights how returning migrants contributed to the formation of a bourgeois middle class that contrasted with existing feudal values. This had implications for family structure, ideas on respectability, and what it meant to transform the homeland into a "modern" society, offering a historical dimension to contemporary research on global mobility.[24]

Khater expands on these ideas in "Becoming 'Syrian' in America: A Global Geography of Ethnicity and Nation (2005), urging scholars to move beyond regional and national boundaries

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[22] Hourani and Shehadi, *The Lebanese in the World, 8.*
[23] Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 14.
[24] Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

in migration studies. Challenging histories that privilege cartographic lines and divisions and regional and national boundaries. Khater finds that movement has long been a characteristic aspect of the Middle East and thus the production of "landlocked histories of the Middle East," that exclude diaspora, neglects the long-term exchange of ideas and interconnected developments that shape homeland and diaspora.[25] Khater asserts that "connections within and outside the Middle East, creating an experience of simultaneity of the near and far for those residing in this interconnected world by constituting transnational and transregional spaces, without dissolving or marginalizing the here and there."[26] As such, immigration is an experience worthy of analysis wielding implications for identity, culture, and politics as is shown in Rihani's own migration journey. Khater's contribution to *mahja*r studies invigorated further pursuit of knowledge on the Syrian/Lebanese diaspora and its impact on the homeland. Rihani's migration and ideological journey highlight the interconnected the way living in the diaspora influenced homeland politics and diplomatic strategies.

**Racialization and Whiteness Studies**

Racialization of Syrians in the US is one thread that can be analyzed in relation to homeland. In *Between Arab and White* (2009), Sarah Gualtieri critically examines race and whiteness among the Syrian diaspora in the United States and their impact on Arab nationalism and modernity. She argues that Syrian Arabs serve as a key case study in the construction of whiteness, "for they did not have firmly established racial identity before emigration.[27] Gualtieri looks at the racial prerequisite cases in which Syrians were embroiled that "aimed at determining whether the applicant met the race requirement of the naturalization law…on the basis of

[25] Akram Fouad Khater, "Becoming 'Syrian' in America: A Global Geography of Ethnicity and Nation," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, no. 2–3 (2005): 299.
[26] Ibid, 299.
[27] Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White, 6*.

membership in the white race."[28] Adding nuance to the discussion of race amongst the early Syrian migrants Gualtieri states:

> "The insidiousness of race in the history of Syrian immigrants in the United States is that many were victims of racism and, at the same time, attempted to challenge it by claiming sameness with the people and institutions that perpetuated it. Simply arguing that this was a strategic move on the part of Syrians at a moment of crisis, as some scholars have done, minimizes the importance of racial ideology in the construction of early Syrian American identity. Such an argument also minimizes the fact that the process of claiming whiteness was uneven and contested: in certain instances, Syrians participated in white supremacy, but in others they resisted it and forged alliances with people of color."[29]

This means that making claims to whiteness were not simply moments of pragmatic action, but became a part of identity. Building on Helen Hatab Samhan's concept of *not quite white*, Gualtieri explores the fragility of Syrians' racial status in the U.S., legally classified as white but grappling with non-white existences.[30] Gualtieri takes a historical approach to analyze newspapers, literature, and materials from ethnic organizations that show how "first-wave Arab immigrants (the vast majority of whom were Syrian) participated in legal discourse and everyday social practices intended to mark them as different and more suited for national integration in America than nonwhites, specifically blacks and Asians." Using Arabic, English, French, and Ottoman sources Gualtieri shows how racial discourse in the United States influenced the usage of racialized language and logics in national independence movements in the Levant and Arab Nationalisms at large. Specifically relevant for Rihani's contact was the 1917 Immigration Act (Asian Barred Zone Act) influenced diasporic nationalists' visions of Greater Syria, reinforcing a racialized separation of the Middle East from the rest of Asia.[31]

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[28] Ibid, *2*.
[29] Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White, 11*.
[30] Ibid*, 10*.
[31] Ibid*, 16*.

**Political Organizing**

In *The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship* (2014) Hani Bawardi explores the political engagements of Syrian migrants in the United States before and after WWI, highlighting how organizations in the diaspora collaborated with organizations in Greater Syria. Bawardi's usage of Arabic newspapers, personal papers, and organizations archives offers convincing revisions to prior scholarship that described a lack of a unified Syrian identity and political in-action based on an inability to bridge sectarian divisions.[32] Bawardi illuminates the existence of national and community identity by writing the historiography of multiple Syrian political organizations, beginning with the Free Syria Society in 1915 and the New Syria Party in 1926 which worked covertly, even in the United States to avoid Ottoman pushback. The inner workings of these organizations indicate the presence of national and community identity, highlighting the centrality of the Arabic press as the primary form of communication and information sharing between political organizations.[33]

In *Between Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (2019), Stacy Fahrenthold examines the *mahjar*'s "transnational entanglements" as Syrians and Lebanese navigated shifting identities from Ottoman subjects to French mandate rule. Using personal documents of activists, she explores how political organizing unfolded across *mahjar* communities in North, Central, and South America. She traces these activities from early discussions in the Arabic press about secret societies formed after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution through the first years of the French mandate.

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[32] Hani Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014),14 and 20.

[33] Hani Bawardi goes on to cover how post WWII intensification of assimilation efforts increased. Bawardi's deep dive into the political dynamics leaves out discussion of community development.

Employing a transnational approach, Fahrenthold underscores the interconnectedness of *mahjar* communities and the distinct strategies they employed in their political engagements. Fahrenthold focuses on a strand of nationalist organizing led by Syrians, Lebanese, and Arabs who believed aligning with the Entente powers would secure the end of Ottoman rule and lead toward independence. [34] By including the years under the Ottoman Empire period, Fahrenthold situates these nationalist movements within a longer historical trajectory, challenging depictions of the Syrian diaspora as either complicit in or indifferent to foreign colonialism.[35] Beyond historical analysis, Fahrenthold integrates theoretical questions about borders, classification, and mobility, thinking about how these frameworks "discipline and define societies, and regulate cross-border mobility."[36] Fahrenthold additionally infuses the lens of race to larger conversations of nationalism by arguing that "Syrian and Lebanese associations employed American racial, religious, and ethnic markers to iterate new nationalities in diaspora."[37] Fahrenthold's transnational approach underscores both the interconnectedness of *mahjar* communities and the distinct strategies they employed in their political engagements.

**Mexican *Mahjar***

Community histories of Syrian *mahjar* communities have also been examined in Central and Latin American contexts. In *So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico* (2007), Theresa Alfaro Velcamp integrates Middle Eastern migrants into Mexican history through a transnational lens while striving to de-homogenize migrant narratives by shining a light on Middle Eastern migrants. Velcamp emphasizes the role of borders and border imaginaries in shaping both state

[34] Stacy Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian Diaspora, 1908–1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.
[35] Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans and the Entente*, 5.
[36] Ibid, 13.
[37] Ibid, 11.

policies and migrant identities and highlights how Syrians strategically framed themselves as foreign subjects within the Mexican national context.[38]

In addition to the press, politics, trade, immigration routes, and familial or home country networks united *mahjar* communities. In *The Mexican Mahjar* (2017) historical anthropologist Camila Pastor examines community development of the Syrian community in Mexico. During this period, Mexico was both a space of transit and settlement that attracted people due to its prospects for trade and investments. The interwoven nature of New York and Mexico was facilitated by "the Press and the notables of the North American *mahjar* with its heart in the mother colony of NYC, [who] were constant interlocutors, and the Mexican-US border a vehicle for the production of value."[39]

Pastor uses the term *Mashriqi* to refer to the Syrian and Lebanese migrants in Mexico. Endeavoring to look at how the change from Ottoman subjects to French mandate subjects impacted positionality and self-fashioning in Mexico. Pastor notes that *Mashriqi* migrants navigated a complex position as "simultaneously imperial subjects (Ottoman, French) and postcolonial national subjects (Lebanese, Syrian, Mexican)." This dual status influenced their community development, as they maintained transnational connections while establishing themselves within Mexico's social structure. Pastor identifies these connections as essential for erecting boundaries, organizing, and aligning subjects. "establishing new boundaries within *mahjar* networks and communities, organizing institutions, [and] aligning categories of subjects." Pastor looks at how racial and class categorization was used to erect boundaries and organize difference amongst the community as well as the narratives of differentiation and

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[38] Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico: Middle Eastern Immigrants in Modern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).
[39] Camila Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar: Transnational Maronites, Jews, and Arabs under the French Mandate* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 18.

categorization she wages to destabilize the black and white dichotomies of undesirable, deserving, or undeserving; as subject, citizen, protégé, or none of the above."

**The Case of Ameen Rihani:**

In the majority of these works, Ameen Rihani is mentioned as a revered poet, journalist, and political commentator, frequently in relation to his publications in major newspapers such as Al-Hoda, and his founding role in The Pen League, *al-rabita al-qalamiya*, the *mahjar* literary organization based in New York. However, it is not until the post-9/11 era that there are focused works published on Rihani. The majority of the works published in English on Rihani focus on literary analysis. Nijmeh Hajjar's book *The Politics and Poetics of Ameen Rihani* takes on the feat of bridging politics and literature. Randa Tawil additionally brings critical studies of Whiteness in the Syrian community to Rihani through analyzing Letters to Uncle Sam. After 9/11 with the rise of inflammatory rhetoric about the war on terror and spiraling Islamaphobic thinking in the US, Rihani's writing, specifically about cultivating positive relations between the United States and the Arab World, were incorporated into works that focused solely on cultivating mutual understanding. Thus, Rihani becomes seen as a figure that would transcend the cavernous divide between "Occident" and "Orient" as unambiguously referenced to in the title of *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West: A Pioneering Call for Arab-American Understanding.*[40]

An example of the difficulties of transnational organizing and the implications of surveillance is documented in *Letters to Uncle Sam*. There were many different views on independence, geographic imaginations, and aspirations for alliance. One such view was that of

[40] Nathan C. Funk and Betty J. Sitka, eds., *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West: A Pioneering Call for Arab-American Understanding* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004).

an independent greater Syria, of a unified Syria and Lebanon from the Mediterranean sea to the Taurus mountains.[41]

Characteristic of this first wave of migration, Ameen Fares Rihani's family pursued financial opportunities in New York in 1888. Born in Freike, Mount Lebanon in 1876 he spent the first 12 years of his life in and out of school, before migrating with his uncle, Abduh, and his school teacher, Naoum Mukarzil. Throughout the rest of Rihani's life, he made multiple return visits for varying durations of time, eventually dying in Mount Lebanon in 1940 after a bike accident.[42]

Rihani traveled to the United States for the first time when he was twelve years old and he continued for the rest of his life to move back and forth. He remained devoted to the cause of Syria and the Syrians in the *mahjar*. Rihani's influential ideas often reflected an amalgamation of his experiences in the *mahjar*. In 2010, Nijmeh Hajjar, a Lebanese-Australian Professor of Comparative Literature completed an in-depth study of the entirety of Rihani's oeuvre when she published *The Politics and Poetics of Ameen Rihani: The Humanist Ideology of an Arab American Intellectual and Activist*. Bringing together Rihani's private and public thoughts written in Arabic and English, Hajjar examines how Rihani grappled with his identity in the East and West and how that corresponded to his synthetic worldview and evolving politics.

Rihani's engagement as Vice President of the Syria Mount Lebanon League of Liberation reflects one period in the evolution of his thought. This was a transnational political party and advocacy group that had chapters in France, New York, and Cairo by 1917. In the United States, this group was writing letters to the government encouraging the US to join the allies in the Great War, for they believed the United States would be a liberator of Greater Syria from the

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[41] Nijmeh Hajjar, "Between Patriotism and Nationalism," in Adel Beshara, *The Origins of Syrian Nationhood: Histories, Pioneers, and Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 165.
[42] Hajjar, *Politics and Poetics of Ameen Rihani*, 22.

"despotic Turks." Despite Rihani's active involvement in this organization, Hajjar tracks in Rihani's subsequent writing and decisions to abstention from signing the Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation letter demonstrates that Rihani's views ended up differing from that of the political organization - who disavowed identifying with Arabs or Arab nationalism, and acquiesced to have the French be the mandate power, adding that this was a cause of tension between the political partners that advocated for France or the United States. Additionally, Hajjar tracks Rihani's thought to later stages where it grows more expansive and inclusive overtime from Lebanon to Syria to pan-Arab unity.[43]

*Letters to Uncle Sam* (1917-1919) is a collection of writings written in the form of letters addressed to the figurehead of the United States reporting his personal experience finding out that the United States was joining WWI. The letters cover Rihani's disappointment of being rejected from the draft and seeking a way to fulfill his duty of how he describes himself as an "indebted son." He identifies his responsibility as mobilizing his fellow Syrian community members to join the US war effort through enlistment or donations by way of forming Syrian Mount Lebanon Leagues of Progress. Thus, he decides to travel to mobilize the Syrian community in Mexico to take action after hearing about pro-German/pro-Ottoman Syrians/Lebanese living there.

Examining *Letters to Uncle Sam* is a means to dissect how Rihani framed himself and his community as "worthy" of the United States's assistance in establishing an independent Syrian state and being welcomed into the United States. In other words, how Rihani was moving between his various affiliations at strategic moments. Rihani's trip to Mexico was part of a broader transnational political activist milieu, in which *mahjar* activists mobilized their host communities during World War I in support of various Arab nationalist causes. In *Letters to*

[43] Hajjar, "Between Patriotism and Nationalism," 164.

*Uncle Sam,* Rihani links his status and integration as a naturalized American citizen to the obligation to fight on behalf of the United States — or help the US help France who will eventually help Greater Syria. Hajjar states that it was a commonly held belief that "if the Syrians did not help to protest against those who orchestrated its liberation. Their freedom would be tied to the will and political interests of those who orchestrated its liberation."[44] Thus political activity in the *mahjar* was seen as directly linked to the prospects of a just future in the home country.

Randa Tawil, applies the lens of cultural and diaspora studies to *Letters to Uncle Sam* in "Racial Borderlines: Ameen Rihani, Mexico, and WWI" an article in the 2019 *Amerasia*. Tawil focuses on how Rihani's usage of racialized language reflected developments in the Syrian American identity. Tawil contends that Rihani's limited success in forming a League of Liberation stemmed from the fact that his vision of Syrianness — shaped by American racial dynamics — did not resonate with Syrian communities in Mexico, hindering effective organizing. Tawil further connects Rihani's political advocacy for a specific geographic conception of Syria to its potential implications for the 1917 U.S. Barred Zone act.[45]

This thesis explores how, at this historical juncture, Rihani navigated competing local needs and sought to leverage transnational connections in support of Greater Syria. Each of these works offers information on migration, race, and politics. Hajjar offers the context of Ameen Rihani, without the enriched conversation of the *mahjar* community. Thus, this thesis bridging the micro and macro, enables us to understand Rihani's political actions alongside developments in the broader *mahjar* community. Additionally, the lens of affiliations has not been used before in discussions of Rihani.

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[44] Hajjar, "Between Patriotism and Nationalism," 168.
[45] Randa Tawil, "Racial Borderlines: Ameen Rihani, Mexico, and WWI," *Amerasia Journal* 44, no. 1 (2018): 88, https://doi.org/10.17953/aj.44.1., 85-104.

**Theoretical Framework:**

Throughout this thesis, while discussing the dynamics of the American and Mexican *mahjars*, Ameen Rihani's politics amidst the global upheaval, and the contents of *Letters to Uncle Sam,* I will employ the lens of transnationalism, long-distance nationalism, and the concept of affiliations. Transnationalism aids in accounting for the social and political developments occurring on both sides of the Atlantic, the breaking down of empires, and the future formation of mandates. Additionally, long-distance nationalism gives language to discuss diasporic devotion to nation-building projects. Lastly, the concept of affiliations enables discussion to go beyond nationality and the nation-state as the sole proprietor of Rihani's self-conception, enabling an expansive exploration of his dynamic, strategic, and evolving positionalities.

Rihani lived a transnational existence, both exposed to and impacted by contexts in homeland and adopted country, a trait shared amongst many members of the *mahjar* community. Thus, utilizing Basch and Glick Schiller's work *The Nation Unbound* and their concept of transnationalism helps to make macrocosmic interpretations of Rihani's microcosmic instances. Transnationalism enables analyzing migrant behavior and persisting connections to multiple geographic locations. Specifically, understanding the *mahjar* as a transnational social field, "networks that link individuals directly or indirectly to institutions located in more than one nation-state."[46] Institutions in the *mahjar* consist of newspapers, relief organizations, ethnic clubs, and political parties. This view helps to understand how Rihani's actions fit into the broader Syrian *mahjar* and how his activities were influenced by his transnational network.

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[46] Nina Glick Schiller, "A Global Perspective on Transnational Migration: Theorising Migration without Methodological Nationalism," in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 112, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mz31.9.

activities in this political moment are related to his transnational existence connecting his networks as a former citizen of the Ottoman Empire, naturalized American in the United States, and participant in nation-making projects associated with Greater Syria. During WWI, the Ottoman Empire, Lebanon, and Syria did not exist in the structure of nation-states, transnationalism is applicable to groups of individuals with shared identities.

This is mobilized in the definition of Schiller's theory in the article "Long-Distance Nationalism" (2002), where she defines the eponymous term as "a set of identity claims and practices that connect people living in various geographical locations to a specific territory that they see as their ancestral homeland."[47] This iteration of nationalism differs from the general definition of nationalism for national borders are not what determines belonging, rather, "long-distance nationalists are expected to maintain some kind of attachment and take whatever actions the homeland requires." Thus regardless of the present system of government present, there is a shared conception of community.

Nationality and nations are not everything, an especially salient fact to Rihani, who viewed himself as transcending bounds and a member of the universal community, often striving to bring down perimeters in exchange for unions. As Nora Lessersohn writes in "The Sultan of New York," affiliations give "agency" to the historical actor, enabling one to avoid oversimplification or reducing the complexity of one's identity.[48]

At times identified as Sirio-lebanese, Syrian, Lebanese, and Arab, Rihani's usage of myriad identities reflect the expansiveness of his identity. While identifying as a Syrian, working with Syrians, and working for a Greater Syria, he also affiliated with identities more expansive

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[47] Nina Glick Schiller, "Long-Distance Nationalism," in *Encyclopedia of Diaspora: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard, vol. 1 (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002), 570–580.
[48] Nora Lessersohn, *The Sultan of New York: Instructive Entertainment and Ottoman Armenian Politics in Nineteenth-Century America (1818–1895)* (PhD diss., University College London, 2023), 30.

and nation and nation-state. In Lessersohn's biography of Christopher Oscanyan, she writes that in writing "the first history of any person from what we now call the Middle East, living in the United States, in the 19th century," relying purely on national identifiers is insufficient.[49] Oscanyan was a prominent educator, performer, and involved political player he identified with various nationalities, identities, and communities at various points. To make sense of the plentiful ties and connections Rihani similarly wields, "affiliations" enables exploration of how "acts of associating with one or more specific nations [was based on] the goal of achieving specific results."[50] Affiliations are versatile in bringing out the extent to which Rihani both moved through, belonged, and was versed in many different spaces and identities; he understood complexity and context.

Affiliations lend vocabulary in order to examine the manner in which Rihani honed in on specific associations within broader categories of nationality. In this thesis specifically, we will look at how affiliating as an American Citizen was hinged upon concepts of behavior and race. Rihani's affiliation with American concepts of civilization and whiteness were central to the way he navigated transnational belonging.

**Methodology**

Ameen Rihani provides a window into the interwoven networks of the Syrian *mahjar* through his interactions with many communities and the complexity of his own identity. *Letters to Uncle Sam* reveals his dynamic nature, embodying historical multitudes while depicting how WWI shaped *mahjar* political visions and dynamics. His linguistically rich portrayal of U.S. Mexico relations at the threshold of WWI, this period reflects a fusion of cultural, political, and social identity.

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[49] Ibid, 22.
[50] Ibid, 30.

Rihani's journey moves fluidly across places and cultures, adapting, evolving, and selectively adopting or critiquing elements along the way. As such, his insights into American and Mexican political atmospheres reflect a perspective of both "outsider" and "insider," that challenge rigid classifications or national boundaries.[51]

Scholarly research on race, economic developments, and migration contextualizes how Rihani may have conceived the world. Studies on *mahjar* community structures, racialization, the role of the *mahjar* press, and political activism provide essential context for understanding his complex affiliations, typical of elite transnational intellectuals. While Nijmeh Hajjar traces his political trajectory, Randa Tawil highlights the political dimensions of his cross-border activities. A transnationalist approach helps illuminate how nation-states and cross-border existences shape self-formation and identity – suggesting that the *mahjar*, though geographically dispersed, functions as a coherent nation.

Rihani's four letters offer a treasure trove of meandering threads from New York to Yucatan to Greater Syria. This thesis honors the fragments by expanding the focus on Rihani from primarily through literary gaze to a discussion including political, social, and historical perspectives.

**Outline**

Chapter 2 presents a contemporary history of migration from Greater Syria to the Americas between (1880-1924) and places Rihani in community with his compatriots. It explores both the political and economic factors that motivated migration and the sociopolitical conditions migrants encountered upon arrival in the Americas. This chapter centers Rihani's

[51] For more on the exilic experience see Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

humanist interventions against sectarianism and critically examines the historiography of Syrian migration and the erasure of political organizing in dominant narratives.

Chapter 3 analyzes how Rihani mobilized citizenship as a legal status and embodies his identity as an "adopted son" to construct Syrian migrants as desirable and loyal political subjects. While examining his involvement in the Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation and his appeals to American ideals of loyalty during World War I, this chapter analyzes how Rihani confronted nativist anxieties and endeavored to reconcile Syrian national aspirations with American civic belonging.

Chapter 4 dives into Rihani's multiple considerations that lead him to go to Mexico for his political missionary trip. It looks at the way Rihani racialized labor and built upon constructions of difference, based on eugenic sciences, to come to the colonial inspired conclusion that Syrians, deemed white by racial prerequisite cases and behavior, are supreme to the native population. Look at the function of labor within race, and how that was used to prove whiteness.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the preceding chapters, weaving together transnational identity, racial ideology, and economic mobility. It reflects on the movement of silk, twine, and tropes symbolizing the broader entanglements between race and national belonging. Finally, this chapter considers the limits and contradictions of respectability politics and racial alignment as strategies for political organizing in the *mahjar*.

## Chapter 2: From Silk to Syndication: History of Syrian Migration and the Making of the *Mahjar* 1880 -1924

### Introduction:

This chapter seeks to contextualize Ameen Rihani's migration to the United States amidst the broader trends of early Syrian migration to the Americas. First, discussing the political and economic changes occuring in 19th century the Ottoman Empire grounds factors that contributed to mass emigration of Christians from Mount Lebanon. Rihani's pioneering role in *mahjar* journalistic, literary, and political life emerges in discussing the Syrian Mother Colony of New York. Woven into this historical grounding is a discussion of *mahjar* historiography and potential reasons that political organizing and the diversity of opinions may have been occluded from initial scholarly literature on Syrian communities abroad.

During the 1840s, under increasing pressure to develop and compete in the growing global industrial system, the Ottoman Empire signed treaties that gave economic concessions to European powers. The 1838 Treaty of Balta Liman marked a significant moment which opened the door to British merchants entering the economy and would grow to harm the local economies of Mount Lebanon and Greater Syria.[52] Subsequently, the 1839 Gulhane Edict, declared all Ottoman subjects equal under the law — regardless of sect — and ended the centuries old *millet* system where Ottoman minority religious communities held more autonomy — and introduced the centralizing *Tanzimat* reforms. The *Tanzimet* rendered all male subjects eligible for conscription into the Ottoman army. The economic, political, and social changes led by the Ottoman Empire's central government in Istanbul, also referred to as the Sublime Porte, were in part a response to growing imperial encroachment and fears of "falling behind" Europe.[53]

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[52] Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 112.
[53] Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 2.

However, while trying to make reforms to stay afloat, increasing European encroachment would have dire economic repercussions and contribute to factors that would lead to emigrants' decision to seek "a better life" abroad.[54]

Out of the tumult and growing pains that the Ottoman Empire was experiencing, the 1860 Druze-Maronite War of Mount Lebanon figures most prominently in the stories of Syrian migrants emigrating between 1880-1924.[55] The outbreak of war came after twenty years of sporadic bursts of violence between Maronite and Druze tribes in Mount Lebanon.[56] The cumulative impact of foreign intervention and a changing Ottoman Empire intersected in complex ways with the formation of sectarian and national identities. According to scholar Ussama Makdisi in *The Culture of Sectarianism* Mount Lebanon was "in flux, as a host of competing armies and ideologies and for totally contradictory interpretations of the meaning of reform…[which] created the conditions for Sectarianism to arise not as a coherent force but as a reflection of fractured identities."[57] Mount Lebanon's location on the Mediterranean, easily accessible by sea and the Christian population's historic ties to different European powers made Mount Lebanon a heavily penetrated region.[58] Thus, Makdisi's analysis points to a shift from an awareness of religious differences on the Mountain to an emphasis on sectarian division under European policy which inflamed volatile rifts.

According to Makdisi, the seeds of sectarian violence were planted "when local Lebanese society was opened, and indeed opened itself, to Ottoman and European discourses of reform that made religion the site of a colonial encounter between a self-styled 'Christian' West and

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[54] Khater, *Inventing Home*, 42.
[55] Jacobs, *Strangers in the West*, 27
[56] Heraclides, Alexis, and Ada Dialla. "Intervention in Lebanon and Syria, 1860–61." In *Humanitarian Intervention in the Long Nineteenth Century: Setting the Precedent*, 134–47. Manchester University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1mf71b8.12, 136.
[57] Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 11.
[58] Fawaz, *An Occasion for War,* 45.

what it saw as its perennial adversary, an 'Islamic' Ottoman Empire."[59] Meaning that Mount Lebanon was a point of collision and conflict between Ottoman and European modernities and a hotbed for negotiations of identity. Existential questions of empire and nation were projected onto regional tensions.

Stories of fleeing sectarian violence are foregrounded in initial *mahjar* histories.[60] However, studies of migration in the immediate aftermath of the war demonstrate that sectarian violence was not the primary motive for moving along transatlantic routes.. Gualtieri writes that "the violence did indeed produce a migration that was hugely uprooting and disorienting for the families involved but the connection the transatlantic migration of thirty and forty years later was based, not on sectarian violence and fear, but on economic and political developments in the wake of the conflict."[61] However, the presence of sectarian violence is significant for what it meant for early migrants. It additionally was used as a justification for further European overtures.

A main outgrowth of the conflict was the 1861 *Reglemente Organique*, an international protocol signed by the French, Austrian, Russian, British, Prussia, and Ottoman Empire which created a distinctly Christian *Mutasarrifate*, a term delineating a province in the Ottoman Empire, that would be governed a Christian *Mutassarif*, governor, appointed by the Sublime Porte.[62] The formation of this territory - while it was still a part of the Empire - brought it closer to the fold of French and European powers, further integrating the region's economy and social structure into expanding European capitalist markets.[63]

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[59] Ibid, 2.
[60] For scholars that emphasize that sectarianism was a driver, see Alixa Naff.
[61] Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White, 26.*
[62] Engin Akarli, *The Long Peace*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 31.
For more on French colonial intervention, Ottoman decentralization, and development of sectarianism see: Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
[63] Fawaz, *An Occasion*, 216.

**The Silk Industry and French Exploitation**:

The global economic order was changing and the semi-autonomous state of Mount Lebanon was engrossed in the interconnected capitalist market. Since the 16th century, farmers in Mount Lebanon had been engaging in sericulture, the raising of silkworms, witnessing incremental growth over the last centuries. However, French investment, enabled by Ottoman capitulations, dramatically developed the industry.[64] Between 1860 and the breakout of WWI, the number of mulberry trees increased tenfold.[65] This rapid expansion funneled in by the collaboration of Maronite *Shuyoukh,* feudal landlords*,* and French developers resulted in a shift from the majority of the population surviving off of subsistence farmers to harvesting silk.[66] According to Khater, the intervention of the French in the silk industry had repercussions for gender norms, sectarian dynamics, and contributed to future migration.

Oftentimes the silk factories were located in Maronite Christian cities. Thus the economic development, and economic boom was more felt amongst Christians, further contributing to sectarian differentiation in migration.[67] The creation of many new job opportunities in factories and a boom in the silk market, led many residents of Mount Lebanon to become accustomed to a higher level of income. The economic development was especially pronounced amongst Christian populations whereas the Muslim population did not experience such upward mobility.[68]

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[64] Note: While foreign investment was critical for the growth, local entrepreneurs also took up investment opportunities. Khater, *Inventing Home*, 30.
[65] Ibid, 22.
[66] Ibid, 12 and 52.
[67] Akram Fouad Khater, "'House' to 'Goddess of the House': Gender, Class, and Silk in 19th-Century Mount Lebanon," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 3 (1996): 325–48, http://www.jstor.org/stable/176390, 337.
[68] Ibid, 337 and Khater, *Inventing Home*, 27. "Druze community remained outside of the Market economy. In part, Khater attributes Maronites participation in the silk industry with the French "because of a history of relations between the Christians of Lebanon and France, [which inclined them more] than their Muslim or Druze counterparts to accept employment from co-religionist Europeans."

Increased opportunity came with increased volatility. With higher incomes and greater dependence on the silk trade, Lebanese Christians, primarily Maronites, became vulnerable to market fluctuations. By the 1890s, multiple factors such as a Pébrine, a silkworm disease, and the success of Japanese silk on the world market led to a drop in the price of silk. As economic stability faltered, many Syrians and Lebanese sought opportunities elsewhere. Thus, Khater concludes that economic transformations related to silk are linked to a discernible trend of Lebanese seeking economic amelioration and "a better life."[69] However, Khater reminds readers of the diversity of motives — for "each emigrant had an individual tale of the event that led him or her out of the village and onto roads to foreign lands."[70]

Alongside these economic shifts, cultural and ideological events including establishment of American Missionary schools and the hosting of global exhibitions like the World's Columbian Exposition also played a crucial role in shaping migrant decisions. Linda Jacobs states that the presence of missionaries were important in encouraging migration to the United States through disseminating stories of opportunity.[71] These schools played an important secondary function in addition to their mediocre attempts at conversion, enabling the spread of "pro-American propaganda" including the vision of a land of opportunity in North America and a land of conquest in South America. Rosy images and stories acted as a pull toward migrating to the United States. Additionally, the networks formed through missionary associations aided in the movement and migration from the Eastern Mediterranean to a spattering of places by way of Europe to the Americas.

The World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 also brought together communities from around the globe. The mingling of people, exposed different cultures to one

[69] Khater, *Inventing Home*, 53.
[70] Ibid, 52.
[71] Jacobs, *Strangers in the West*, 28.

another and cultivated foundational ideas exoticizing the Orient from the perspective of the West.[72] Spectacles at the Exposition reflected a specific vision of the East that fueled an exoticizing desire and market for Oriental goods and products. Interactions and partnerships developed at the fairs may have aided in building ties between Greater Syria and the U.S..

**The Peddler Mythology and the Phoenecian Legacy in Syrian Migration Narratives:**

The character of the Phoenician merchant has played a symbolic role in narratives of mass Syrian migration.[73] In the anti-immigrant, nativist climate of the United States, aligning with a European-esque heritage was seen as a strategy for legitimizing their presence.[74] Tracing Syrian/ Lebanese lineage to the ancient Phoenicians, an enterprising, seafaring civilization often celebrated for its mercantile skill, Syrian and Lebanese migrants assumed a biological inheritance of a natural "business acumen." This legacy helped to shape the character of the itinerant Syrian peddler. Sallum Mukarzel, writing in *The Syrian World*, suggests that peddlers could be agents of colonialism – transporting goods and culture to lands unreachable by other white men.[75]

The Syrian peddler plays a starring role in the story of Syrian immigration. Upon arrival at major ports of entry there are stories of men who would loan new arrivals trinkets, notions, and other goods to fill their first *kashes,* baskets*,* enabling them to earn an income traversing the

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[72] Ormos Istvan, "Cairo Street at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 at Chicago: 2012." Fondation Max van Berchem, 2012. https://maxvanberchem.org/en/scientific-activities/projects/architecture/14-architecture/128-cairo-street-at-the-world-s-columbian-exposition-in-1893-at-chicago.

[73] On connection between Phoenicianism and nationalism see Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia*: The Search for Identity in Lebanon, To learn more about how Phoenicianism was latched onto for inhabitants of Mount Lebanon to make sense of the large scale movement of people out of Mount Lebanon and how it was related, "to devise "structures of feeling" capacious enough to accommodate the unsettling facts of large-scale movement" see: Andrew Arsan "Citizens Of The World... Who Stopped On Every Shore": *Eastern Mediterranean Migration, Social Thought, And The Diasporic Uses Of The Phoenician Past*, c.1880–1940, https://lebanesestudies.ojs.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/mashriq/article/download/15/479/3388?inline=1#fnref11

[74] Gualtieri, *Between White and Arab*, 159.

[75] Sallum A. Mukarzel, "History of Syrians in New York City: Metropolis Is Now Their World Trade Center," New York American 3 October, 1927 13.

country as pack peddlers.[76] The image of a peddler, tracking long distances, visiting faraway places, and selling to vast and varied communities on the way to become economically successful is important in its relation to the narrative of how Syrians could be economic assets to society. The traditional narrative states the migrants started out as peddlers, before transitioning to shop owning, and some becoming wholesalers that they had the capacity to grow and succeed.

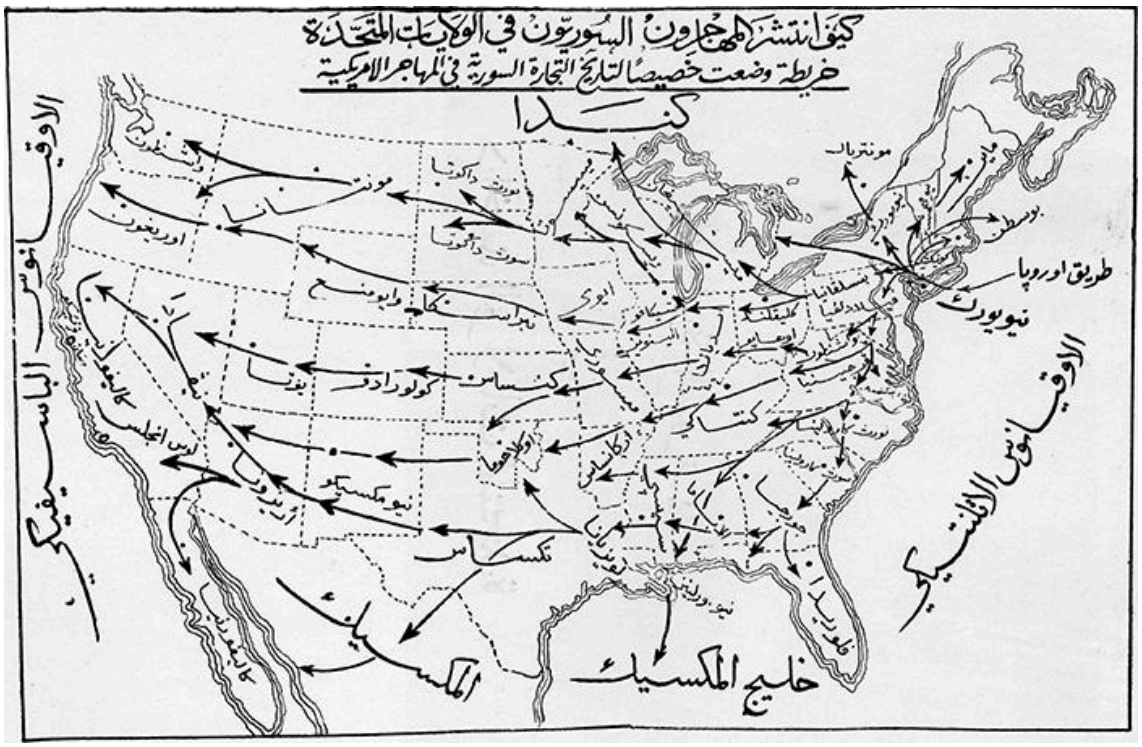


Image: Map of Peddler Trade routes. Sallum Mukarzil's History of Syrian Trade in the American *Mahjar*. [77]

Initial narratives of *mahjar* history latched onto the linear peddling trajectory of Syrians in the United States. According to Habib Ibrahim Katibah in *Arab-Speaking Americans* "Syrians became the peddlers par excellence. They went far beyond the confines of their little colony on

[76] On peddlers and the role men and women played see Linda Jacobs, Strangers in the Wesst for discussion of how peddling was a common trade and Charlotte Karem Albrecht, *Possible Histories: Arab Americans and the Queer Ecology of Peddling* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).
[77] Sallum Mukarzil, *Tarikh al-Tijara al-Suriyya fi-l-Mahajir al-Amrikiyya* (New York: al-Matbaʿa al-Suriyya al-Amrikiyya, 1921), 42.

Washington Street, far beyond the metropolitan and state limits, into other strange cities, towns, and hamlets… So thorough was the coverage of those vendors that several items, including German razors, were said to have been popularized in America through their activities."[78] Katibah, highlights the benefits Syrians were bringing to the world, even bringing new and essential goods. While some Syrians were peddlers, recent scholars have emphasized the diversity of occupations and lifeways within the migrant population.[79]

**Rihani**

Among the thousands of migrants who navigated this world of trade, transition, and transnationalism was Ameen Rihani. Like the vast majority of migrants, word of economic opportunity motivated migration. In 1888, Rihani and his uncle Abduh, and neighbor and former teacher Naoum Mukarzel travelled to the United States. Rihani and his family settled in lower Manhattan, in the enclave of Syrian migrants that became known as *Little Syria* on the lower west side of Manhattan.

The Washington Street enclave was a tightly knit community, the majority of recent arrivals lived in tenement housing and operated small businesses. As Linda Jacobs documents in *Strangers in the West*, those with greater financial means would open a store on a higher floor. The neighborhood grew to be full of grocery stores and cafes that served the Syrain community as well as those serving "Americans." The stores had brass laps, *nargila*, Oriental fabrics, and other exotic goods from the holy land. According to an 1899 New York Times article, "These cafes, the shops, the wholesale emporiums, and the group of dirty tenements down toward Battery Place tell the story of "Little Syria" precisely. The shops are nearly all groceries to start

[78] Habib Ibrahim Katibah, *Arabic-speaking Americans*, compiled in collaboration with Farhat Jacob Ziadeh (New York: Institute of Arab American Affairs, 1946), 29.
[79] See: Stacy D. Fahrenthold, *Unmentionables: Textiles, Garment Work, and the Syrian American Working Class* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=37216. Sarah Gualtieri, "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis: Women and Syrian Transatlantic Migration, 1878–1924," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 1 (2004): 67–78.

with, but they carry much else in stock, not the least among which sundries are great brass lamps… The wholesale establishments, especially those in a big modern business building, are much Americanized in their arrangements, but their heaps of goods speak of the Orient and that alone."[80] American newspaper coverage of the colony described the neighborhood in line with Orientalist exoticizing.[81]

The newspaper continues to reveal the racialized expectations and scrutiny under which Syrians were subject. Cromwell meets with Michael Kaydouh, a cigarette shop owner, at Sahadi's, a famed grocery store that lasts to this day, noting, "Kaydouh, save for his olive skin and his cast of features, scarcely seems Syrian at all. His English is pure and has little foreign accent…" Kaydouh is starkly contrasted with impoverished migrants deemed "hags and heldames...wretched old men and great families of dirty children," that make up "Little Syria's inferno."[82] Cromwell's writing reflects the scrutiny of which the Syrians were subject and way economic success, class, and wealth were central to one's worth. While Kaydouh could nearly pass for an American, the Syrians facing poverty were equated with making a segment of New York into a living hell.[83] While economic success and English abilities deem one near "American" poverty was used to reinforce a narrative of immigrant undesirability.

According to Jacobs by 1890 Rihani's Uncle Abduh was living on 73 Washington Street At the age of twelve after on and off schooling Rihani began a life in the US living alongside migrants facing similarly difficult situations, families collaborating to make ends meet, save up money, and adjust to living in a new culture.[84] Uncle Abduh and Naoum Mukarzel pursued

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[80] Childe Cromwell, "New York's Syrian Quarter," *New York Times*, August 20, 1899.
[81] See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
[82] Cromwell, "New York's Syrian Quarter."
[83] Jacob Berman. "Mahjar Legacies: A Reinterpretation." In *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, edited by Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat, 73–94. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013 for writings on the "Street Arab" and the discussion of the "Street Arab" in 1871 Horatio Alger's Tattered Tom or, The Story of a Street Arab
[84] Jacobs, *Strangers in the West*, 71.

business and started a store together that eventually went under. Again, in 1894 when Rihani's father Fares joined in the US, he and Abduh began another business venture together.[85] The trials, tribulations, and familial efforts to make a living surrounded Rihani. Though upon settling in the New York he was put in a Catholic school in Newburg, his father took him out of school for four years to put his English skills to use as he became a book-keeper in the family import export business."[86] In *Book of Khalid* (1911), Rihani's most famous English publication he identified his struggles as similar to those experienced by his greater community of "compatriot-merchant[s]."[87] However, Rihani pursued what could be considered a more untraditional route — seeking alternative ways to influence and affect his surroundings not necessarily by way of economic growth, rather artistic and creative pursuits. Hajjar notes that Rihani's decision to join Henry Jewett's theatre troupe performing in Saint Louis, Missouri to be "the first break on record with the traditions of Syrian emigrants in the USA and elsewhere."[88] Though participation in the troop was short lived, his introduction to art and literature caused him to dramatically change paths from business. He enrolled in law school in 1896, but like his initial entrees in business, he found it incompatible with his temperament. That same year, seeking an outlet of expression began to publish articles in *Al-Hoda*, the newspaper founded by Naoum Mukarzel in 1892.[89]

At the height of the *mahjar* press, there were more than forty-four Arabic-language newspapers in circulation. Fahrenthold writes that "The newspapermen believed they were printing the nation into existence; there was a battle for the nation and for subscribers

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[85] Ibid, 71.
[86] Hajjar, *The Politics and Poetics*, 22.
[87] Ibid, 22.
[88] Ibid, 23.
[89] Linda K. Jacobs, *Captivating Strangers: Early Arab Immigrants in the United States* (New York: KalimahPress, 2025.) This paper was initially founded in Philadelphia, but according to author Linda Jacobs, Mukarzel was entrenched in a scandal with his wife Sophie and quickly relocated along with the newspaper to New York City.

simultaneously."[90] Many of the newspapers had religious affiliations and political slants. *Al-Hoda* was the most widely circulated newspaper throughout *mahjar* and is often discussed in relation to its staunch Maronite and Lebanist viewpoint and advocacy of an independent Lebanon post-WWI.[91]

Rihani frequently commented on how sectarian arguments weakened the impact and potential of the *mahjar* press. Rihani wrote extensively about the internal conflicts that tore through the immigrant press, emphasizing the need to rise above religious sectarianism. He criticized figures like Mukarzel for advocating "extreme zeal" for Lebanon's independence while denying similar aspirations to other Syrian nationalists. [92]

Bawardi's Analysis of *mahjar* newspapers shows how the press "performed double duty by serving the intellectual literary needs of immigrants while also providing news of the old country." [93] For *mahjar* communities abroad, newspapers offered prescriptions of behavior offering guidance in how to behave and make sense of "hyphenated identities," integrating while still strengthening and passing on one's Syrian culture, keeping children within their faiths, as well as preserving Arabic language.[94] These conversations took place across the diaspora often taking place in conjunction with one another with newspaper syndicates printing and distributing articles in multiple locations.[95] Thus, newspapers show both how communities were in

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[90] Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans and the Entente*, 8.
[91] Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans,* 62.
[92] Henry H. Melki, "Al-Sahāta al-arabiya fi al-mahjar wa ilāqatuha bi-al-adab al-mahjari" [The Arab-American press and its relation to diaspora literature], PhD: diss., Georgetown University, 1972, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI, 188-189. Hajjar brings special attention to Rihani's speech on St. Maroun Day in 1900, advocating for religious tolerance, based on issues faced in the New York colony between sects as a moment he was gaining a following. And how this was gaining bad press in the newspapers. This is seen in the documentation of sectarian wars in New York papers.
[93] Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans*, 54.
[94] For more on the significance of hyphenated identities: Fine, M. and Sirin, S.R., 2008. *Muslim American youth: Understanding hyphenated identities through multiple methods* (Vol. 12). NYU Press.
[95] Fahrenthold, Stacy, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente*, 8.

conversation with one another and engaging in debate as well as how *mahjar* identity was formed through lines of communication, despite communities existing in disparate locations.[96]

**Newspaper and the Mahjar Press**

The newspaper had been present in the Ottoman Empire, since it was "brought over by Napoleon with the conquests." Connections with American missionaries in the Middle East helped publishers circumvent Sultan Abdul Hamid's prohibition on exportation of the Arabic linotype printing press which was key to the establishment of *Kawkab Amrika,* the first Arabic newspaper in the U.S. in 1892.[97] Within the Ottoman Empire newspapers were under censorship from Ottoman authorities, thus publishing in the *mahjar* wielded opportunities to discuss political ideas — critical of the Empire or nationalist — that may have otherwise been grounds for assassination such as was the case after the Young Turk Revolution in 1908.[98] When Sultan Abdul Hamid punished the Arab nationalists in 1916, this was a major turning point, transitioning political thought in the *mahjar* from thoughts of decentralization to separation.[99]

**Political Associations**

While the *mahjar* press served as a vital space for intellectual exchange and identity formation, parallel political associations also began to emerge, driven by homeland concerns and shifting global alliances. Although the roots of political organizing lay in Greater Syria, growing Ottoman repression made it more feasible for activists to operate from abroad.

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[96] For more on the crucial role of the press see Fahrenthold's *Transnational Modes and Media* (2013) and Reem Bailony, *Transnationalism and the Syrian Migrant Community: The Case of the 1925 Syrian Revolt* (2013)

[97] Naff, *Becoming American*, page. For more information on print culture in the Ottoman Empire see: Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9–15.

[98] "People used various postal systems in order to evade censorship, as well as maximize the probability that their precious packages reached their destination. They also made friends, relatives, and acquaintances carry parcels for them." Khuri-Makdisi, Ilham. "Levantine Trajectories: The Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and between Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria, 1860–1914." Order No. 3117992, Harvard University, 2004. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/levantine-trajectories-formulation-dissemination/docview/305191261/se-2., 87n168.

[99] See Chapter 3 for more on the progression from decentralization to independence.

The relative distance of Syrian communities in the Americas from Ottoman repression, and later from wartime violence, afforded them a degree of security and organizational freedom not available to those in the homeland. However, life in the United States required migrants to also navigate the racial and political dynamics of the nation-state. As Bawardi emphasizes, immigrant activists were acutely aware that their actions regarding the homeland would shape their standing in their adopted country.[100] In an environment rife with anxiety over immigrant loyalty, visible political engagement could be a double-edged sword — especially for elites whose public discourse might be viewed with suspicion by the American public. Thus, many community leaders weaved political organizing to fit the requirements of assimilationist projects aimed at uplifting the community's image.[101]

The early history of Syrian migration cannot be separated from these nationalist discourses. Migration and nationalism developed in tandem. Bawardi writes that Syrian emigrants were not passive observers but participants in transnational political life: Immigrant activists understood that their responses would inform their standing in their adopted country."[102] The question was not whether to act, but how, and through what language and strategies. Many political organizations advocated for action in response to war and famine in the homeland, but the means and rhetoric employed varied.

**Syrian Migration and Nationalist Narratives:**

Rihani's writings, particularly his essays and political fiction, engaged directly with these questions. As Bawardi explains, his novella *Letters to Uncle Sam* (1917) must be understood within the broader context of Arab American hopes pinned on Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. Issued in 1918, Wilson's doctrine promised to fight for "the liberation of nations and

[100] Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans*, 69.
[101] Gualtieri, *Between White and Arab*, 2009.
[102] Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans*, 69.

oppressed peoples around the world." [103] Many in the *mahjar* interpreted this as a potential lifeline. As Bawardi puts it, activists "saw an opportunity of a peace dividend encouraged, albeit prematurely, in Woodrow Wilson's ideas of self-determination, on the victors' terms, especially since the U.S. role in the war was viewed as benign and non-colonialist." [104] Hoping to align Arab aspirations with American interests, *mahjar* organizations began recruiting fighters for the U.S. Army, believing that demonstrated loyalty could win political support for Syrian independence.

This complex landscape of migration, economic adaptation, and politics laid the groundwork for new expressions of identity and belonging. We will see how these took fuller shape in Rihani's literary and political writings.

[103] Wilson, Woodrow. "President Wilson's Message to Congress, January 8, 1918." Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46 (1918).
[104] Bawardi, Hani J.. *The Making of Arab Americans: From Syrian Nationalism to U.S. Citizenship*, 42.

## Chapter 3: Leveraging Immigrant Affiliations

"It is not I alone, therefor, and the thousands of your adopted Syrian children that are indebted to you: our native country, our own native people are bound to you in eternal gratitude. For if France has been the protector of Syria in the past, you are the savior of Syria today."

-Rihani, Letter 2

**Introduction:**

When the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of Germany in late 1914, five months after it had begun, many Syrians and Lebanese still maintained a deep Ottoman affiliation. Up until that point, the dominant political strategy among Syrian political leaders was one of decentralization: a reformist approach that sought to fight for Arab cultural and political rights within the existing imperial structure. This movement emerged in opposition to the centralizing campaign led by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), which increasingly promoted a Turkification agenda that alienated minority populations.[105] The First Arab Congress of 1913 in Paris articulated decentralist visions, emphasizing "the Arab claim to full political rights and to an effective share in the administration of the affairs of the empire."[106]

Among the Syrian diaspora, this loyalty to the Ottoman framework was echoed by figures such as Najib Diyab who attended the Congress. Speaking on behalf of many in the diaspora, he asserted that Syrians wished to "remain in the Ottoman bosom by preserving its patriotism, a necessary precondition for protecting the rights of our brothers left behind."[107] Diyab's words reflected the prevailing belief and strategic vision that the flourishing of the Arab communities depended on securing a more inclusive and pluralistic version of Ottomanism.

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[105] Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908–1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 183.

[106] George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1938), 115.

[107] Najib Diyab, "Amani al-Suriyyin al-Muhajirin," *Wathaʾiq al-Muʾtamar al-ʿArabi al-Awwal,* 68.

However, in 1916 bubbling calls for independence reached an apogee after CUP leader Cemal Pasha, the wartime governor of Syria, publicly executed eleven Arab dissenters on "trumped up charges of treason."[108] The Ottoman Empire's overt anti-Arab violence and the worsening famine in Greater Syria led Syrians and Lebanese in both the homeland and *mahjar* to mobilize public and governmental support and raise funds to support competing political visions – including coalescing around the idea of an independent Greater Syria through alliance with the Allied powers.[109]

Ameen Rihani was one such Syrian-Lebanese leader that grew to advocate for an independent Greater Syria with the aid of the allies. Firmly rooted in both the United States and his homeland of Greater Syria, Rihani sought ways to leverage his status as a naturalized American citizen to influence the United States wartime conduct, encouraging the nation to enter the war on the side of the Allies. For at the time of WWI, Rihani believed that U.S. participation in the war and in the post-war future would help to ensure independence and some form of self-determination for Greater Syria. In order to attain his goals, he recognized the need for political advocacy in the U.S. and to prove Syrian immigrants' loyalty.

Rihani wrote *Letters to Uncle Sam*, a series of four letters as direct appeals to the leaders of America, reflecting the need to perform loyalty, a necessary requisite for recognition as worthy citizens which would aid in political advocacy. Addressing Uncle Sam, and using the self-referential "adopted son," Rihani uses literary maneuvering to discuss diplomatic advocacy and military recruitment to prove Syrian worthiness for both acceptance in the US and as part of his campaign to secure postwar self-determination. At the same time, his writing punctures America's exclusionary ideas of citizenship, deploying sarcasm and Orientalist tropes to navigate

[108] Gualtieri, *Between White and Arab*, 84.
[109] Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans and the Entente*, 64.

anti-immigrant hostility. Additionally, Rihani emphasizes loyalty as a moral obligation rather than a pure material legal status. In doing so, he extends the concept of citizenship beyond possession of legal documents to an active, intentional demonstration of service and sacrifice. Thus, this text, which reflects the intersection of Rihani's political and literary work, ties into broader discussion of transnational political struggles of the Syrian *mahjar*, negotiations of identity, allegiance, and belonging.

An analysis of *Letters to Uncle Sam* demonstrates Rihani's affiliation as a loyal, naturalized American citizen to lend legitimacy to his political mission. Simultaneously, he presents himself as an insider in the Syrian community, claiming authority as a cultural intermediary capable of mobilizing his compatriots in alignment with U.S. interests. These dual affiliations — national and communal — underscore the complex positionality of immigrant elites during a period marked by widespread anti-immigrant distrust. Rihani's text enumerates how individuals sought to counter accusations of disloyalty by adopting the rhetoric and symbols of American nationalism, by framing military service as a demonstration of allegiance.

**American Entry into WWI**

Rihani and other interventionists had been advocating for the US to enter WWI since the war broke out in 1916. The United State's longtime isolationist foreign policy made the US remain neutral in the "Great War" for nearly three years before intervening. President Woodrow Wilson initially supported neutrality, running a re-election campaign on the slogan "He Kept Us Out Of War." However, as discussed by Justus Doenicke, the tide shifted with the Germans resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the Zimmerman Telegram was made public to Americans March 1, 1917.[110]

[110] Arthur Zimmermann to Heinrich von Eckardt, January 16, 1917, *The Zimmermann Telegram*, trans. and decoded by British Intelligence, published in the *New York Times*, March 1, 1917. Justus D. Doenecke, "'And the War Came: March—April 1917,'" in *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of America's Entry into World War I* (Lexington,

The telegram was an incitement sent by German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman to the German Minister to Mexico Heinrich von Eckhardt to urge the President of Mexico Venustiano Carranza to join the war on the side of Germany, in exchange for Germany aiding Mexico to reclaim land taken by the US during the Mexican-American War.[111] Though Mexico declined Germany's offer and remained neutral, the direct affront to America's national security along the southern border further stoked sentiment against Germany. This combined with attacks on American ships led America to declare war on Germany. [112] Justus Doenicke describes Wilson's address to Congress: he asked for them "to recognize that a state of war — in his words, "nothing less than war"-- already existed between the United States and Germany… [and] in an obvious reference to the Zimmerman telegram, he accused Berlin of stirring up "enemies against us at our very doors.'"[113] The United States officially entered the war on April 6, 1917, joining the Allied Powers: Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and Serbia.[114]

US entry was a major win for Rihani, who was at the time acting as Vice President of the Syrian Mount Lebanon League of Liberation (SMLLL) , a group comprised of Syrian and Lebanese political activists in the *mahjar* working to recruit Syrians in the *mahjar* to fight in the allied armies as a part of a strategy to secure independence from Ottoman rule. In *Letters to Uncle Sam*, Rihani, or his fictional persona, expresses excitement over this moment:

> "[W]hen I read your cable message – I was in Spain then – than you no longer could tolerate the insolence of the Boches and that you have made up your mind to speak to them in the only language they can understand, I threw my hat in the air, shouting in my own native gibberish my Godspeed to you…"[115]

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KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011; online ed., Kentucky Scholarship Online, 14 September 2011), 289. https://doi.org/10.5810/kentucky/9780813130026.003.0010, accessed 29 March 2025.

[111] Woodrow Wilson, *War Message to Congress*, April 2, 1917, in *Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link, vol. 41 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 6–15.

[112] https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/telegram-american-embassy, notably the US did not declare war on the other central powers.

[113] Doenecke, "And the War Came," 289.

[114] Ibid, 289.

[115] *Letters*, 12.

Rihani expresses how America's intervention was long awaited. Additionally, Rihani's comments express common wartime rhetoric; he refers to Boches, a derisive term for Germans, insinuating that the only actions they understood were violence. An additional perk of joining the war was that previous efforts to recruit soldiers could become a public affair. Prior to America's declaration of war, *mahjar* recruiting efforts for Syrians to join other allied armies had to remain covert, on account that it could be perceived as espionage or endangering America's national security, in addition to the prevalence of Ottoman undercover officials. However, with America's engagement, these recruitment efforts could be viewed as beneficial to America's wartime mass mobilization.[116]

However, the Syrian *mahjar* was divided over whether to take a side in the war. In the United States, where Syrians were generally aligned with the Allies, fears of being labeled an "enemy within" persisted, as the Ottoman Empire — though not formally at war with the US — was allied with Germany. America's wartime climate compounded this anxiety, which targeted dissenters and viewed former Ottoman subjects with suspicion. Rihani long advocated for US entry into the War; once in it, he shifted his goals to working to get the US to support his mobilization efforts in Mexico as well as priming the US to take part in post-WWI independence efforts of Greater Syria.

**Theoretical Framing**

Lessersohn's framework of affiliations provides a way to examine the literary and political aspects of *Letters to Uncle Sam,* elucidating how Rihani positioned himself as a loyal, naturalized American Citizen, or "adopted son" to help actualize his political aims.[117] Taking his

[116] From the *Mahjar* campaigns approximately 10,000 Syrians had joined the United States army by 1918 in addition to smaller numbers joining the French Légion d'Orient and the Canadian Expeditionary Forces. Fahrenthold, Stacy, *Recruitment Among Syrians in the Americas*, 1916-1918, p. 90.
[117] Lessersohn, *The Sultan of New York*, 30.; Hajjar, "Between Patriotism and Nationalism," 168.

words as intentional is a legitimate exercise, as Rihani considered himself a "man of letters," whose words are chosen deliberately to project a given image.[118] At this moment in time, he sought firstly to legitimize his appeal for U.S. intervention in WWI against the Ottoman Empire and secondly, to advocate for an American pioneered mandate in Greater Syria in line with the vision of the SMLLL. Rihani also activates the tension between being an "adopted son" — a figure fleeing tyranny to seek refuge in America's "generous welcoming democracy" — in order to add gravity to the moral weight of his active, demonstrated loyalty.

Rihani's affiliations were fluid and dependent on language, context, and aims. In this case, Rihani is highlighting a narrative that would be pleasant to the ears of an American struck by the pangs of anti-immigrant fervor. Through sarcasm, humor, and usage of courtroom and panel settings, Rihani directly engages with stereotypes and prejudice, employing what Hajjar, drawing on Edward Said, describes as "self-irony."[119] The use of self-irony allows Rihani to both address and subvert prevailing biases, while ultimately reinforcing Syrians capacity for integration and loyalty.

Rihani's rhetoric, which emphasizes allegiance and loyalty, reflects his awareness of the way his activism on behalf of the Syrian-American *mahjar* and project in Greater Syria are intertwined. Upon American entry into the war Rihani states that he is ripping up his "certificate of birth" signifying a disaffiliation with his homeland, in exchange for loyalty to the United States.[120] However, this statement and action is challenged in the way his goal seeks to work on behalf of Greater Syria. In *Letters* Rihani traverses multiple nationalities and kaleidoscopic

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[118] On Rihani's personality as a "Man of Letters" to subvert Orientalist tropes see: Waïl S. Hassan, "The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1/2 (2008): 245–75, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20492219.
[119] Hajjar, *The Politics and Poetics*, 16. Referencing: Said, Edward W. *Representations of the Intellectual*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
[120] *Letters*, 12.

identities, conveying through structure that American and Syrian interests are not mutually exclusive.

Rihani's negotiation of multiple affiliations–to the U.S. , to Greater Syria, to fellow immigrants, native-born Americans, and Syrians in the homeland–is reinforced through his military recruitment activities. He emphasizes compatibility based on an ineffaceable loyalty exhibited through military service, for in the U.S. military service was conveyed in media, posters, and wartime campaigns as the criterion of loyalty.[121] Fahrenthold discusses how military recruitment was "a significant form of war work, illustrative of a symbolic compact between Arab migrant communities and the host societies they lived in."[122] Thus, the political activities described in *Letters to Uncle Sam* reflect greater currents in the *mahjar* and how *mahjar* advocates viewed military service as a means to build bonds between the immigrant community and the adopted country.


Image: James Montgomery Flagg. *I Want You for the U.S. Army*, 1917. Lithograph. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

**Reading Letters to Uncle Sam :**

The form of an epistolary novella gives readers the feeling they are gaining insight into the inner workings of Rihani's mind — whether authentic or tainted by reticent self-presentation — while offering his views on America's role in the war and the obligations of citizens to the

[121] To learn more about government propaganda and various materials produced by the state to link patriotism and loyalty to wartime action see Fischer, Nick. "The Committee on Public Information and the Birth of US State Propaganda." *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 1 (2016): 51–78. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44779771.

[122] Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans and the Entente*, 83.

nation.[123] At one point Rihani noted that "the language of Shakespeare' –English–came before Arabic to his 'tongue and pen'."[124] It is additionally noted that Rihani's writing in English and Arabic have different functions. When writing in English, Rihani aimed at persuading American audiences of the richness and value of Arab culture and connected to that was the value and loyalty of Syrians[125]

*Letters to Uncle Sam* reflects Rihani's multiple considerations regarding the future of Greater Syria and the status of Syrians in the United States. Rihani sought to "uplift" the social standing of Syrians in the United States because, as touched upon in Chapters 1 and 2, the prevailing ideas on racial eugenics rendered social status racially regulated.[126] Thus, "uplifting" came with the burden of proving one's whiteness, often along civilizational lines. In the case of Rihani, this manifested in writing narratives that underscore Syrians' racial compatibility, adding weight to the claims of loyalty and worthiness of citizenship.

This is noteworthy, for Rihani is writing after the racial prerequisite cases that took place between 1909 and 1915 which determined, along precarious lines, that Syrians were white and thus eligible for citizenship.[127] Though Rihani received citizenship in 1900, many of his Syrian compatriots were deeply embroiled in the anxieties and uncertainties of one's ability to naturalize and whether or not they would be granted the privileges of citizenship.[128] Thus, it was common

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[123] For more on the Epistolary Style see: Duyfhuizen, Bernard. "Epistolary Narratives of Transmission and Transgression." *Comparative Literature* 37, no. 1 (1985): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/1770522.
[124] Al-Maghrib al-Aqsa, AAK-2, p.8; Letter to 'Isa al-Khuri, 23 May 1901, in Rasa'il, pp.29-31.
[125] From his first major work in English The Quatrains of Ab'l-Ala, he had audiences amongst elite Western literati from prior connections, from this publication he became a member in multiple literary societies and started publishing in various journals. Hajjar, Politics and Poetics, p. 26: "From 1921 his name started to appear in reference books such as the Who's Who in America, Who is Who Among North American Authors, and Who's Who in Literature (Britain) and, after his death, in Who Was Who in America and in American Authors and Books 1640 to the Present Day." (34)
[126] Sarah Gualtieri, "Becoming 'White': Race, Religion and the Foundations of Syrian/Lebanese Ethnicity in the United States," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20, no. 4 (2001): 29–58, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27502745.
[127] These cases would continue until 1923. The results were not definitive. Lopez, Ian Haney. *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race.* New York: New York University Press, 1996.
[128] Gualtieri, *Between White*, 5.

amongst community leaders to speak, write, and educate on intrinsic "quality" of one's race to prove and promote popular understandings of a group's capacity for integration and assimilation.[129]

The original manuscript is available digitized at the Khayrallah Center Archive. In 2001, the letters finally were published. Thus, questions remain unanswered: to whom exactly were these letters addressed? Without knowing Rihani's exact intent, analyzing his transnational political activities requires factoring in dominant narratives of anti-immigrant sentiment and citizenship in order to examine how Rihani is framing himself and his community. His intentional affiliation leads the reader to imagine he is addressing a group of people primed to think disparagingly of immigrants, those who held the belief that foreigners were treasonous, disloyal, burdens to societies. Emphasizing his moral and ethical citizenship through action, Rihani attempts to expand his moral code to apply to fellow Syrians.

This novella highlights Syrians precarious acceptance in the United States and Rihani's maneuvers around prejudice. Additionally, the letters highlight the acrobatics which are part and parcel of transnational organizing — juggling domestic and international contexts, inter-ethnic conflict–and how Syrian loyalty in Mexico was interconnected to the belonging or acceptance of Syrians in the United States. The content of the *Letters* epitomizes Rihani's transnational activities, his multi-directional visions, and the awareness of citizenship that can only come through such intentional attainment of citizenship.

**Military Service as a Measure of Citizenship and Loyalty**

Wartime national security further implicated immigrants into a broader conspiracy of anti-immigrant hostility. In the name of national defense, sweeping policies were implemented

[129] See more on Sallum and Naoum Mukarzel: Suleiman, Michael W. "The Mukarzels' Contributions to the Arabic-Speaking Community in the United States." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1999): 71–88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41858285.

against immigrants and other groups deemed threatening to US national security. Germans became the first "enemy other." This meant closing down the German immigrant press and the enactment of various campaigns to establish that foreigners were unwelcome in the United States, as they could be considered enemies within.[130]

Syrians largely avoided the crackdown on immigrant press, but the 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act disrupted U.S.–Mexico trade routes, severely impacting Syrian businesses. In *The Mexican Mahjar,* Pastor points to the fact that French foreign legions were in charge of deciding who constituted a threat. U.S. and British officials were charged with monitoring the Texas/Mexico border.[131] Though suspicion of immigrants before the war was great, the wartime mobilization and propaganda increased it.[132] Additionally, the 1917 Asian Barred Zone Act had negative effects on Syrians ability to naturalize and informed emerging political visions of Greater Syria that would remain outside the lines of restriction.[133]

In times of crisis — or manufactured crisis — individuals are forgotten, while entire communities are flattened into easily categorized, discriminated, nameless bodies. Writing amidst the passage of these policies, Rihani describes the way America's imbrication in conflict impacted immigrants as follows:

> "The machinery of justice in time of war, no matter how efficient it is and how honest and discriminating are those that have it in charge, can not but mow down now and then a

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[130] Capozzola, Christopher Joseph. "Uncle Sam Wants You: Political Obligations in World War I America.", Columbia University, 2002, 177. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/uncle-sam-wants-you-political-obligations-world/docview/304799698/se-2

[131] Pastor, *The Mexican Mahjar*, 55.

[132] See more: The Espionage and Sedition Acts of 1917-1918, David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 79-84. Trading With the Enemy Act of 1917, which granted the federal government the power to regulate financial and commercial transactions. Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You*, 112-120. For more on how this specifically impacted Syrian and Lebanese Trade Routes: Stacy Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente: The First World War in the Syrian and Lebanese Diaspora, 1908-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 87-103.

[133] Tawil, "Racial Borderlines," 85.

> few good plants with the noxious weeds and sometimes, of its own momentum, destroy a flower bed."[134]

Rihani acknowledges the indiscriminate nature of large-scale national policies that fail to account for individual exceptions. Yet, despite his critique of the government's flattening, Rihani still endeavors to highlight his loyalty, manifesting in tangible action to advocate for Syrians' status. His writing reflects a tension between resistance and assimilation: while he sarcastically critiques America's wartime excess, he ultimately crafts an assimilationist narrative reflecting the strategies of many immigrant intellectuals navigating the precarious landscape of U.S. citizenship at this time.

**Rihani's Mission in Mexico**

When the loyalty, trustworthiness, and allegiance of the "Syrian race" was further put into question when word was spread of pro-German Syrians acting in Mexico Rihani saw it pertinent to act and organize "bringing his Syrian compatriots back to the faith" and reify Syrians innate loyalty through diplomatic maneuvers amongst American diplomats.

Rihani's skills as a "free-lance diplomat" and advocate led him to seek the most effective way to highlight Syrians' loyalty specifically through military service.[135] Amongst Syrians in the *mahjar*, military recruitment was widely seen as a way to promote Syrian loyalty with various campaigns occuring throughout the Americas to recruit Syrians to fight in the allied armies.[136] These efforts were framed both as a way to improve their status in their adopted countries and as a strategic move to claim a role in the war effort — positioning Syrians for greater rights in the host country and self-determination for the home country. Additionally, in the United States

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[134] *Letters*, 37

[135] Second to fighting in the army, newspaper like *Al-Nasr* state that buying liberty loans is the most effective way to prove you are 100% American. Bilingual Liberty Loan advertisement, "La tathabbat marra wahida innaka Amriki bal mi'a marra / Prove you are 100% American", *al-Nasr*, 30 September 1918, 5.

[136] See Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans and the Entente* for the various campaigns occurring across the Americas and Europe.

some immigrants were promised citizenship for participation in the Selective Service.[137] However, a tension emerges in Rihani's emphasis on citizenship: he urges all naturalized Syrians to fight for the U.S. Army, yet many Syrians are simultaneously being denied the right to naturalize due to racial restrictions. What are the implications of this contradiction in his argument? A question worth posing but left unanswered.

As touched upon previously, allied intervention on behalf of Syria was not the sole perspective present. After all, it was word of German-allied Syrians in Mexico that brought Rihani to Yucatan.[138] It is said that the SMLLL was acting in direct response to Antonio Latayf's Ottoman-aligned, pro-German agenda promoted in the Mexican Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Jawater*.[139] Rihani describes Latayf without stating his name.

At the end of Letter 4, Rihani writes:

"There is in fact but one arch-spy, a Christian from Mt. Lebanon, who is the Minister's courier, barker, go-between and emergency-chef…they are all impregnated with German bacillus: their activities are out of proportion to their number. The fact that they have an organ gives them the advantage of the man on the roof who can disperse a crowd with a pail of swill."[140]

As a prominent figure in control of one of the main newspapers, Latayf's pro-German content was threatening. To counter the "out of proportion impact" Rihani went to Mexico to garner allied support by setting up a branch of the League of Liberation and encouraging enlistment in the French Legion D'Orient or American army.[141] Rihani was potentially selected for this position because of his connection to Mexico through his brother Jo Rihani, who had

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[137] 9 May 1918 Act offered instantaneous American citizenship to "all aliens in the service (including enemy aliens) to citizenship whether they have their first papers of not..". War Department organizational records, 77th Division records, Office of the Chief of Staff, memorandum no. 79, 21 May 1918.
[138] *Letters*, 24.
[139] Tawil, "Racial Borderlines," 93. See also *The Mexican Mahjar*, 61.
[140] *Letters*, 45.
[141] Notre Dame University–Louaize (NDU), *Ameen Rihani Biography*, accessed March 15, 2025, https://www.ndu.edu.lb/Library/Assets/Micro/Files/ILTMicrosite-English/AmeenRihani/Biography.pdf.

moved to Mérida in 1906 to start a branch of his father's silk company.[142] With already his pre established business and familial connections, Rihani was seen as suitable for the job.

Thus, in November 1917, Rihani voyaged to Mérida, Mexico to organize a League of Liberation. As stated on the masthead of the 1917 League of Liberation, the program's mission was "To seek through France and her allies the liberation of Syrian and Mt. Lebanon from Turkish rule and Turkish sovereignty, real, or formal"[143] These organizations were affiliated with the missions of other political organizations in Greater Syria and the *mahjar,* such as Shukri Ghanem's Comité Centrale Syrienne.[144] The express aim of the groups were to raise money for the allied cause and to recruit Syrians to join the American war time effort. While successful in forming a League of Liberation in Yucatan, Rihani faced backlash from what he describes as treacherous German-indoctrinated Syrians who reported him to the Mexican government; as a result, he was deported for violating Mexico's status as a neutral country.[145]

After being declared a *persona non-grata* and forced into hiding, Rihani spent part of his time waiting for the Mexican government to revoke his deportation by writing the four letters.[146] In the letters, he depicts the events that motivated him to travel to Mexico and mobilize, the sights and sounds he encountered, and the broader themes of loyalty, citizenship, war, labor, politics, role of the US government, and obligations of "adopted children." While Rihani writes a

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[142] Tawil, *Borderlines*

[143] Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation, "Newsletter from the Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation, 1917," letter to Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker Jr., 1917, accessed April 13, 2025, https://www.kahlilgibran.com/archives/written-works/380-newsletter-from-the-syria-mount-lebanon-league-of-liberation-1917/file.html.

[144] Hajjar, *Politics and Poetics*, 60.

[145] Fahrenthold, *Between Ottomans*, 7. "Syrianists, Lebanists, and Arabists competed, engaged in sabotage, and routinely called each other traitors (often while secretly collaborating in war work)..."

[146] *Letters*, 44. "Guidado Treinta Tres! Which in English would run thus BEWARE OF THIRTY THREE!...Thirty Three it seems, is a remedy the patent rights of which are held exclusively by the Mexican Government. It is applied principally against a persona non grata, who is otherwise called extranjero pernicioso. And when it is applied, the patient has to go out of the country for a change of climate."

fictional ending in which he is vindicated and the German minister is deported along with him, in reality no governmental support materialized, and Rihani retreated back to the US.

**Rihani's Conception of Loyalty and Citizenship:**

Rihani's evolving ideas on citizenship are found throughout his works. Notably, in his first novel in English, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), where he writes an autobiography-inspired narrative that follows a similar trajectory of an immigrant travelling from the Levant to the United States and the differences he confronts. The last section of the book, "The Prophet of the New World," takes place after Khalid, the protagonist, returns to his homeland and begins to posit ideas synthesizing experiences in both East and West. He writes about his thoughts on universal citizenship: a citizenship not bound by borders or nation. He argues that it is "Not he who bears the passport of a nation, nor he who shouts most loudly in its streets, but he who serves humanity best–he is the true citizen."[147] Having experienced the problems with both "American democracy" and "Arab governance," Khalid concludes that holding legal status and wielding official recognition by a nation does not translate to the fulfillment of one's moral or civic responsibility to the broader community. Mere attainment of documents does not satisfy one's personal responsibility to the greater good; rather, it is the actions one takes to actively serve.

Rihani additionally centers the idea of citizenship in *Letters to Uncle Sam,* adding the layer of the sanctity or quality of one's motivation in doing one's duties as a moral citizen. Rihani specifically centers the idea of citizenship in relation to military service, striving to make the point that immigrants are very willing to participate in military service and sacrifice themselves. Rihani writes about how the draft, or mandatory conscription, is an affront to citizenship and discredits those that are naturally motivated to defend one's country. Specifically,

[147]Ameen Rihani, *The Book of Khalid* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911), 404.

Rihani notes that he and his fellow "adopted sons" have the potential to be motivated for the right reasons, demonstrated when he offers a moral hierarchy of the levels of citizenry and loyalty:

> "There are three classes of loyal citizens, your Honor, – those who are loyal from a sense of duty, those who are loyal from a sense of gratitude and those who are loyal by compulsion. It is needless to say who of them stand highest in our estimation…"[148]

Rihani's categorization leaves it unclear which he values more – is it duty or gratitude that is the most ethical source of action? It is an active choice informed by their experiences fleeing "old-world tyrannies and tyrants into your open arms, who found a welcome haven on your shores." Thus, Rihani argues that, "It is not I alone, therefore, and the thousands of your adopted children that are indebted to you: our native country, our own people are bound to you in eternal gratitude."[149]

Rihani's concept of citizenship is tied to service, duty, and moral obligation. If he cannot prove his loyalty through military service, he will do so through a privateering missionary effort. The transformation from aspirational soldier to empowered missionary demonstrates how he intends to proselytize. As a political missionary, he guides his Syrian compatriots toward allegiance to the United States and the allied causes.[150]

Additionally, Rihani affiliates his actions with that of missionaries and the mission to bring Christianity and civility to unstable lands - something interesting to consider for many of the first interactions of the United States with the Middle East was through missionaries. Rihani, once denied the opportunity to fight in the army, makes the United States his church and faith, serving as a proselytizer and missionary. Rihani, like any good missionary, is equipped with

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[148] *Letters*, 18.
[149] *Letters*, 23.
[150] See Hajjar, *Between Patriotism and Nationalism: Ameen Rihani's Vision for Lebanon and Syria* , 167-168 for the importance Rihani places on active Syrian participation in liberation.

insider knowledge of what it means to be Syrian, which he sought to use his positionality to make effective action, meaning acting in alliance with the United States.[151] He states that he will "bring [his] native people back to the faith."[152] Rihani goes on to describe how he thinks his missionary activities will be successful for: "their Phoenecian shrewdness, their commercial resources inexhaustible…For if the Syrian is always open to negotiations, he is also open to conviction."[153]

> "It's shameful, infamous," cried my Syrian patriot. Their treachery is a blot upon the Syrian name; it's a discredit to the Syrian nation. Why don't you go down to Mexico and organize a League of Liberation among them."[154]

Rihani's transition from soldier to political missionary typifies how loyalty is cultivated. Through the use of Orientalist rhetoric and his claim of insider authority, Rihani situates himself as one who is converting Syrians to the Allied cause in a manner that mirrors the imperial entanglements of missionaries, marrying diplomacy, empire, and knowledge.

**Actions of Loyalty, Promulgating American Propaganda:**

In the *Letters*, the need to prove his loyalty was underscored by Rihani's insertion of dialogue as if he were on trial in court. Talking directly to the judges and jury, he attempts to prove that he is not just a man of words, but one of action. Rihani discusses how he wrote letters to former presidents Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but he is aware that this, according to his own moral and political philosophy, is not the way to prove that he is devoted and loyal. Incorporating his categorization of loyalty, he makes an effort to convey that his choice to enlist in the US Army came from a place of gratitude: he frames himself as one

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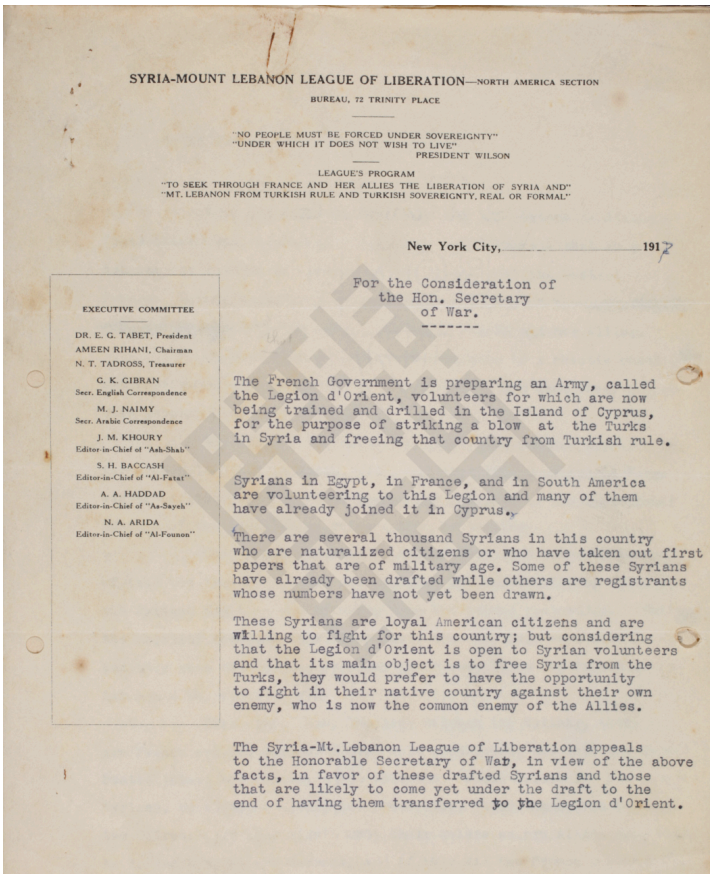
[151] Rihani, "tried to appropriate that stance of Orientalist translator and, in fact, their implicit claim was that they were better equipped to interpret the Orient than European Orientalists. Hassan, *The Rise of Arab-American Literature*, 250.
[152] *Letters*, 24.
[153] Ibid, 25.
[154] Ibid.

"Requesting the privilege of showing my gratitude, as a beneficiary of democracy, to Uncle Sam."[155] This is a part of his trial, in which he is interrogated to offer proof of his loyalty.



SYRIA-MOUNT LEBANON LEAGUE OF LIBERATION—NORTH AMERICA SECTION
BUREAU, 72 TRINITY PLACE

"NO PEOPLE MUST BE FORCED UNDER SOVEREIGNTY"
"UNDER WHICH IT DOES NOT WISH TO LIVE"
PRESIDENT WILSON

LEAGUE'S PROGRAM
"TO SEEK THROUGH FRANCE AND HER ALLIES THE LIBERATION OF SYRIA AND"
"MT. LEBANON FROM TURKISH RULE AND TURKISH SOVEREIGNTY, REAL OR FORMAL"

New York City, _____ 191?

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For the Consideration of
the Hon. Secretary
of War.

The French Government is preparing an Army, called the Legion d'Orient, volunteers for which are now being trained and drilled in the Island of Cyprus, for the purpose of striking a blow at the Turks in Syria and freeing that country from Turkish rule.

Syrians in Egypt, in France, and in South America are volunteering to this Legion and many of them have already joined it in Cyprus.

There are several thousand Syrians in this country who are naturalized citizens or who have taken out first papers that are of military age. Some of these Syrians have already been drafted while others are registrants whose numbers have not yet been drawn.

These Syrians are loyal American citizens and are willing to fight for this country; but considering that the Legion d'Orient is open to Syrian volunteers and that its main object is to free Syria from the Turks, they would prefer to have the opportunity to fight in their native country against their own enemy, who is now the common enemy of the Allies.

The Syria-Mt.Lebanon League of Liberation appeals to the Honorable Secretary of War, in view of the above facts, in favor of these drafted Syrians and those that are likely to come yet under the draft to the end of having them transferred to the Legion d'Orient.

The goal of the SMLLL is to recruit soldiers, whether to fight for the American army or otherwise. Was the loyalty derived from fighting for the US the same as that which could be earned from fighting for the allied armies? Rihani also interjects the interests of the Syrians fighting in the war itself, and how loyalty to the wartime cause was enough to be loyal to the U.S.. The way the leaders of the SMLLL viewed this issue is demonstrated in a letter addressed to the Secretary of War. Under the authority of the President E.G. Tabet and Chairman Ameen Rihani, they wrote on behalf of naturalized Syrians who are subject to the draft, also arguing that Syrians should be permitted to fight as members of the the French-organized League of Liberation, which at the time was engaged in combat in the Middle East:

> "These Syrians are loyal American citizens and are willing to fight for this country; but considering that the Legion d'Orient is open to Syrian volunteers and that is main object is to free Syria from the Turks, they would prefer to have the opportunity to fight in their native country against their own enemy, who is now the common enemy of the Allies."[156]

[155] Ibid, 17.
[156] Image: Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation, "Newsletter from the Syria-Mount Lebanon League of Liberation, 1917," letter to Secretary of War Newton Diehl Baker Jr., 1917, accessed April 13, 2025,

Rihani saw that Syrians joining the army would enable them to share in the fruits of liberation and thus gain a place in an independent nation that they played a part in creating; Rihani states the French have already realized this fact, based on the framework of the French League d'Orient. Moreover, the Legion was *actually engaged in* fighting with the Ottoman Turks, the very enemy that Rihani surmises Americans will also grow to hate, though they would never officially be at war with.

**Extending the obligations of a citizen to that which a nation has to do for its people.**

Rihani connects the obligation or necessity to act beyond the bounds of only "the citizen" and their relationship to "the nation state." He compares American aid to France to French aid to the fledgling United States during the Revolutionary War: "America going to the rescue of France who in 1778 went to the rescue of America, when the cause of liberty was in the darkest hour of danger, when Washington's army was shivering and starving in Valley Forge, enduring bravely the pangs of destitution but facing despair and defeat."[157] Thus, Rihani believes that the US must show gratitude to France, as France must also show gratitude to Syria. The nations almost take on the traits of citizens that can join together for a shared, mutual benefit. At the end of the novella, once Rihani has succeeded in forming the league, he states, "For here is Syria working for Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam working for France and France working for Syria."[158]

**Critical of Loyalty and Use of Sarcasm**

Throughout the novella, Rihani makes clear that he does not unreservedly comply with the standards of loyalty that he or the American populus is held to. We see this when he refers to

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https://www.kahlilgibran.com/archives/written-works/380-newsletter-from-the-syria-mount-lebanon-league-of-liberation-1917/file.html.

[157] *Letters*, 15.

[158] Ibid, 46.

himself as merely a cog in the machine. Additionally, Rihani's usage of Orientalist tropes are often used in a sarcastic way. This is most apparent in the following quote:

"I talked with my Syrians to get, if possible, at the bottom of their Oriental inscrutability. Are they honest in their intentions? Their sentiments, at least corroborated their generosity. But sentiment is one thing in these days of scarcity and high prices that is not subject to boards of economy and control. Sentiment, especially with the Syrians, is cheap – the cheapest article in their shops; and it can be as dangerous as any tangible and material ruse. No, dear uncle, I am not too hard on my Syrians. I happen to know them better than the Allied consuls here and I was determined to put their sentiments and all the material manifestations of it, to the proof. Will they keep their purse out of their hearts and sacrifice it, if necessary, for a conviction? Will they come out openly, bravely, unhesitatingly as a pro-Ally community regardless of the consequences? Will they have the courage to organize a League of Liberation."[159]

Rihani argues that he knows more than the allied consuls and better understands the way Syrians work. Rihani reframes the criticized and stereotyped characteristics of Syrians, such as their "shrewdness," as traits that can be optimized to support the allies in this scenario. In this quote, he illustrates what Jacob Berman describes as Rihani's proclivity for "ludic representation," meaning that Rihani "stretches tropes past their logical limit, revealing essentialism as a ridiculous premise."[160] This is also a way to make sense of the experience of anti-immigrant sentiment.

**The Color Characteristics of the Conqueror: Disloyal Syrians and Distance from the Turks**

The Turks, allies of the Germans, serve as a central explanation for any perceived Syrian deception or misbehavior. Their 500-year rule is cited as the reason some Syrians may have sided with the wrong camp during the war. At this moment, Rihani aligns himself with American Islamophobia to distance Syrians from any potential association with the enemy.[161]

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[159] Ibid, 34-35.
[160] Jacob Berman, "Mahjar Legacies: A Reinterpretation," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, ed. Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 74.
[161] Karine V. Walther, *Sacred Interests: The United States and the Islamic World, 1821–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Khaled Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 45–50.

Tapping into popular resentment of the Ottoman Turks, Rihani alleges that any disloyalty among Syrians is a residual effect of Ottoman Turkish rule. The ascription of blame on the Turks coincides with Rihani's effort to translate distaste into action. Specifically by the United States expanding the war through declaring the Ottoman Empire as an enemy along with Germany which would enable the American army - and the potential Syrian recruits to fight in the

Rihani portrays the supposed treasonous behavior of Syrians as an unfortunate legacy of 500 years of Turkish domination. Drawing on a range of cultural references, he cites Ibn Khaldoun, Rousseau, and Montesquieu to argue that conquered peoples often adopt the characteristics of their conquerors:

> "The Syrians, as you know, have been born stoically–I should say heroically–for five centuries the galling yoke of the Turks. Our non-resistance was in a way compatible with our spiritual heritage. But his criminal tyranny has driven many of us, who would neither repudiate nor observe the Sermon on the Mount, to the four distant corners of the earth. Those that remained at home were Christians after a fashion, sharing in the vices of the conquerors. (If they had any virtues, the conquerors, they would have been assimilated as well.) This is natural. For Tacitus and Montesquiei and Ibn-Khaldoun agree that a conquered people gradually take on the color-characteristics of the conqueror. But what is the color characteristics of the Turk? The wily and wicked Turk, whenever he was cornered by the European Powers, whenever he was threatened with a superior force, he plotted, intrigued, and betrayed his friends."[162]

This framing is also critical for understanding the positionality of Syrians in the United States, as they sought to distance themselves from the Turks — who, due to their association with Islam, were seen as incompatible with American citizenship. Thus, the struggle against the "despotic Turk" is not only a military one but also a cultural and ideological battle being fought at home.

This dual conflict appears in Rihani's references to the "treacherous actions of Syrians in Mexico." While continuing his missionary work in Mexico City, Rihani receives what he calls a "gorgeous, egregious, outrageous Syrian welcome." At a lavish gathering of wealthy Syrians and

[162] Letters, 21.

"Lebanonese" in a home furnished with “furniture in the Louis-Quatorze style… Persian rugs and Japanese screens and Valencienne curtains,” Rihani speaks with members of the Syrian community. One attendee, “a genial gentleman… a scion of a line of belligerent Lebanonese,” remarks: “the German Legation...is the Kaaba these days of the treacherous Syrians, who are, I assure, but very few…”[163] This scene of the dinner party shows how Rihani frames the allied Syrian/Lebanonese as wealthy, European, and refined, while the associating the treasonous Syrians with symbols of Islam - a religion viewed as a blasphemous religion . In this case, Islamic affiliation becomes synonymous with German sympathies. Thus reinforcing the threat that both the US and Rihani face.

Though Rihani's views on Islam are unstable, we see the way that the character of Syrians is diametrically opposed to that of the Turk and the Syrians that are aligned with Germany. Here is another time when the political vision of Rihani for independence from the Ottoman Empire overlapped with seeking independence from the Ottoman Empire and pursuing good standing in the United States.

**Affiliation Strengthens his claims to Citizenship through Documentation**

Pairing this statement with that of the *Book of Khalid* where he seems to devalue the passport as a material symbol of citizenship is interesting to pair with the multitude of mentions of his own paper documents. Thus it is interesting noting whether his opinions have changed or if he is addressing a different audience, differing beliefs, or differing contexts?

For though we may have an idea of Rihani’s beliefs regarding citizenship, paper documentation plays a highly symbolic role in Letters to Uncle Sam, indicating an awareness of the concrete metrics that he is graded against as a naturalized citizen partaking in transnational political activity.

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[163] *Letters*, 39.

Rihani begins in the first letter stressing that he has ripped up his birth certificate in order to lay claim that he is now aligned with his documentation of naturalization. The fact that the war propelled him into such a mode of allegiance shows how this was not an identity that was passively assumed but intentional which adds to its morality. The idea that migrating to the US and gaining this citizenship added to its weight and the responsibility to wield it with action.

> "But since April 1917 the complex consciousness and psychology of your adopted son have changed completely. Also this attitude toward the household among whom fortwent years he lived and played and walked in his dreams. I have torn up my birth certificate, Uncle, and turned my back on all the moralists of Arabia."[164]

At the time that Rihani is writing these letters, around WWI, paper documentations are growing in significance.[165] It is also significant because at this time dual citizenship with the Ottoman empire is not allowed, thus the representation of ripping up his document of birth gives weight to the ideological split he is framing occurred after the outbreak of the war. Rihani frames his change from being a questionable citizen to a loyal one signifying a step towards loyalty. In addition Rihani is not only saying that he is officially severing ties with the government that granted a birth certificate, but the people of his native land that American nativists feared he would remain loyal to. This is prompted by hearing that the US was going to war shows the transformative, catalyzing nature that Rihani ascribes to the war.

Rihani integrates the materiality of citizenship through passports and documentations of naturalization as they stand as proof of belonging. Just over a decade after the introduction of "portable proof(s) of citizenship," we see how they are integral in situations where his identity is doubted.[166] His loyalty is juxtaposed with the doubt he faces as an immigrant when he is heading

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[164] *Letters*, 12.
[165] John C. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[166] U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "History of the Certificate of Naturalization (1906–1956)." Last modified February 11, 2025.

to go to the US to fight, but is questioned by the American soldier on the way. They are a symbol of belonging when his appearances are deemed "other."

> "The passport formalities were as rigidly observed, of course, even in the case of an American returning to his country to join the army or the navy – to join anything organized for national defense. Joiner of no joiner, however, I was for a moment suspected by the keen, penetrating eye of an officer of the French Republic "You are not a native American," he said scrutinizing my passport and casting a furtive glance on what might turn out to be a deadly Oriental instrument of Kaiserism. "I am an adopted son of Uncle Sam", I assured him, producing the Certificate of my Adoption."[167]

Rihani's interaction shows the racialized way that American citizenship is gauged and the way in which Rihani's loyalty is doubted. Rihani emphasizes the irony of the situation, making a statement that appearances are valued more than the actual action at hand and effort to show one's loyalty, i.e. going to serve in the army, but he is building affiliation with disloyal people. Only by offering two forms of proof of citizenship is he viewed as legitimate. This again emphasizes Rihani's perspective of actions as the measuring stick of loyalty.

**Implications of Affiliation**

This chapter looked at the way Ameen Rihani has strategically represented his multiple affiliations in Letters to Uncle Sam, a text both political and literary, to prove Syrian loyalty and advance his dual-pronged mission: elevating Syrians in the United States as well as work towards Greater Syrian self-determination.

Through the epistolary form, Rihani frames loyalty as the basis of political activism and the recognition of immigrants as a worthy citizen. He drove this point through a range of rhetorical and diplomatic maneuvers - deploying sarcasm, Orientalist tropes, and the setting of a

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https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/stories-from-the-archives/history-of-the-certificate-of-naturalization-1906-1956.

[167] *Letters*, 14.

courtroom trial as a literary device, while simultaneously engaging in military recruitment, advocacy, and direct appeals to US leadership.

Rihani documentation of his "missionary" effort in Mexico highlights how Syrian *mahjar* elites responded to anti-immigrant emphasizing the logic of loyalty and national service, fixing military participation as a means to prove allegiance. At the same time, Rihani's writing reflects a nuanced critique of American wartime policies and nativism, through his usafe of self-irony. Additionally, Rihani's hierarchy of loyalty, which placed gratitude driven service above coerced duty – evidences his argument that Syrian immigrants were ideal citizens precisely because they intentionally sought ways to demonstrate their commitment.

Situating Letters to Uncle Sam with the context of WWI period, enables a closer analysis of how Rihani and the SMLLL engaged with American wartime policies and anti-immigrant sentiment and transnational organization. His negotiation of and a moment in time when Rihani was aligned with the SMLLL is interesting to analyze for the ways in which Rihani reflects, embodies, and responds to American wartime propaganda and anti-immigrant sentiment. The negotiation of citizenship and loyalty reveals the instrumental role of affiliation in transnational political strategy, supporting Stacy Fahrenthold's assertion that war work created bonds between immigrant communities and their adopted nations.

Ultimately, Rihani's text is a study in maneuvering between political landscapes — both American and Syrian — while leveraging affiliation as a tool for legitimacy. In the context of *Letters to Uncle Sam*, Rihani crafts his identity as an indebted "adopted son" and positions Syrians as deserving of American patronage in the global struggle for liberation.

Thus, *Letters to Uncle Sam* reveals how citizenship and its demand for loyalty — served as a key element of Rihani's transnational mobilization. The next chapter will explore Rihani

worked to secure Syrian inclusion within the American national imaginary through emphasizing through engaging other aspects of racial discourse.

## Chapter 4: Whiteness and Racialization

"There it is then – the job that is cut out for me and that I'm cut out for. There is my destination. I'll go down to Mexico on a little private business, 'privateering' for Uncle Sam. I'll make Excelenz give up his spoils–I'll bring my native people back to the Faith."[168]

"As for the Syrians, their commercial spirit is immune to Bolsheviks or socialism of any color or shade. They are in Yucatán gradually supplanting the Mayans. Or might they not be walking in the footsteps of their ancestors the Phoenecians…"[169]

*Letters to Uncle Sam* (1917-1919) engages with developments happening in the US, Mexico, and the theater of WWI. Letters three and four center on the sights and sounds Rihani encounters in his trip to Merida and Mexico City, Mexico. Rihani contextualizes his political organizing by describing shifting labor conditions in revolutionary Mexico and the Syrian community's integration, or lack thereof, with Indigenous Mexicans. Rihani employs the language of contemporary racial science to construct a comparative framework between Syrians and Mexicans based on labor and work ethic to assert Syrians' racial superiority. Rihani uses the rhetorical structure of comparisons to demonstrate to the American government that investment in the Syrian national cause would be mutually beneficial: the Syrians could act as a stabilizing force in Mexico and the US could help the Syrians organize and fight on the way to liberation. Ultimately, reading the text as a piece of political propaganda demonstrates the interconnection between race, labor, and *mahjar* nationalism.[170]

### Race in the United States

Race was a critical component of living in the United States, as privileges and opportunities were allocated based upon race. The right to naturalize and become an American

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[168] Letters, 24.
[169] Ibid, 34.
[170] Thorough it is outside of the scope of this thesis which centers on the relationship between Rihani's activities in connection with developments centered in the US, it would be meaningful to reexamine Rihani's ideas of labor in conversation with the labor movement happening in *fin-de-siecle* Eastern Mediterranean, more specifically the Arab region of the Ottoman Empire. See the Chapter, "Workers, Labor Unrest, and the Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Leftist Ideas" in Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

legally was a right conditional upon race. According to the 1790 Naturalization Act, only "free white persons" could become naturalized citizens, and a century later, the Naturalization Act of 1870 extended rights to people of African descent after the end of the Civil War. The way American legal status was intertwined with race was indicative of the centrality of race to the American experience. However, what did American racial categorization mean for races and people that did not fit clearly into the constructions of White and Black?

Ameen Rihani was writing at the height of WWI, an era Matthew Frye Jacobson characterized by "racial nationalism (roughly 1790 to 1924), [when] American identity was defined as much by race as by political ideals. One was American by virtue of being white."[171] This meant that building a white identity was essential for legal matters and social standing. The effort to construct a narrative and logic identifying Syrians as white gained momentum when their legal right to naturalize came under scrutiny in U.S. courts beginning in 1909. Even after Syrians were officially categorized as white in 1915, the task to build a "civilized" and "worthy" status within the hierarchy of races within whiteness was a project taken upon by Syrians throughout the diaspora — working to highlight their various attributes that would give them higher social standing.

**Racial Prerequisite Cases**

Syrian immigrants were able to naturalize with relatively little pushback mostly on account of growing labor demands.[172] The millions of immigrants from around the world who arrived at the turn of the century were met with surging nativist sentiment fueled by race science

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[171] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 7.
[172] Fahrenthold, Stacy D. "Arab Labor Migration in the Americas, 1880–1930." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History.* 23 May. 2019; Accessed 9 Apr. 2025. https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-598.

led groups who advocated for the exclusion or barring of entry of certain racial groups.[173] The immigration and naturalization processes became increasingly monitored and regulated. As indicated in the 1906 Naturalization Act which introduced an English-speaking requirement for naturalization, serving as an institutional barrier that restricted certain groups from obtaining citizenship.[174]

Contemporary ideologies in eugenics and race science continued to inform the legal and bureaucratic decisions surrounding eligibility. These pseudoscientific frameworks were critical tools in the state's efforts to categorize, label, and essentialize difference, also known as the process of racialization.[175] Having to qualify for citizenship based on fitting a certain racial qualification was a tangible moment of racialization.

"Race" according to Jacobson, "resides not in nature but in politics and culture. It is not color but race that is socially constructed."[176] As immigration became increasingly regulated along racial lines, and legal challenges around racial classification multiplied, the U.S. legal system and federal government worked in tandem to construct a framework of racial supremacy.

The racial prerequisite cases were legal challenges in which immigrants argued in court that they were racially white and therefore qualified for U.S. citizenship through naturalization.

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[173] For example, the 1906 Naturalization Act, which created more federal control over immigration and citizenship, part and parcel of efforts to control and ban races deemed racially unfit. See Lee, Erika. *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943.* University of North Carolina Press, 2003., Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America.* Princeton University Press, 2004., Haney López, Ian. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race.* NYU Press, 2006.

[174] U.S. Congress, "An Act to Establish a Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, and to Provide for a Uniform Rule for the Naturalization of Aliens Throughout the United States", 59th Cong., 1st sess., chap. 3592, 34 Stat. 596, 599 (1906).

[175] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 110. Racialization is defined as, "The extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group."

[176] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.

Between 1878 and 1952, fifty-two cases were reported.[177] Litigating race was not an affair isolated to Syrians, however Gualtieri notes that Syrians were disproportionately represented in the cases tried in court.

**Syrians Place in Racial Prerequisite Cases**

When the racial eligibility of Syrians to naturalize was challenged, there was a large-scale mobilization of Syrians to counter the challenge to whiteness. Money was raised and lawyers were hired to tell the story in court of why the Syrians were *worthy* of whiteness. The initial court cases that "won" the Syrians the right to be considered white people were based on race science and the use of religion to prove whiteness - connecting the ancestry of the predominantly Christian Syrian/Lebanese population with the Semitic race, whereby through the fact that Jews were able to naturalize Syrians would be able to as well. This was the case with Costa Najour in 1909 whose lawyer used A.H. Keane's *The World's People*, a book of eugenics to show that Syrians were Caucasian a term at this time deemed synonymous with white.[178] However, as seen in later cases, being scientifically white was not enough, one had to prove they were the "right" kind of white through proving one was civilized enough.

Race science was used to ascribe certain behaviors and ways of life to people based on specific phenotypical or genetic characteristics. Thus, Syrians sought to use the race science of the day to build inclusion in whiteness from a scientific basis. Even for those allowed entry, the influx of immigrants of "lower racial stock" was seen as a crisis in the United States. Eugenic ideas underpinned how immigrants were seen as corrupting the US and was an essential issue to be addressed by government officials. Roosevelt considered "Race suicide," meaning the end of

[177] All but one case was based on being white, In re Cruz 1938, Tehranian, John. "Performing Whiteness: Naturalization Litigation and the Construction of Racial Identity in America." *The Yale Law Journal* 109, no. 4 (2000): 817–48. https://doi.org/10.2307/797505.
[178] Gualtieri, *Between White and Arab*, 60.

the purity of superior Anglo-American blood, which he saw the question of preserving the stock as "fundamentally infinitely more important than any other question in this country."[179] The issue extended beyond white and black and was considered problematic within the categorization of whiteness itself. Roosevelt viewed the crisis around blood as "a kind of race war pitting the higher races of his native Americans against two groups deemed inferior by dint of their heredity: "degenerate" poor white families of native descent and immigrant workers from Southern and eastern Europe."[180] Thus we see in Roosevelt's fears the way in which racial hierarchy was intertwined with ideas on labor, wherein wealth and occupation were tied into the level of development, evolution, and progress associated with one's race.

**Whiteness in Everything, Whiteness as Performance**

John Tehranian states that in prerequisite cases, "whiteness was determined through performance."[181] Immigrants were evaluated not by innate racial characteristics but by their perceived ability to assimilate into Anglo-American norms such as religion, class orientation, and personal character. These cases offered a microcosmic view of broader U.S. society, revealing that becoming "American" required adherence to culturally sanctioned behaviors associated with whiteness.

Similarly, Nell Irvin Painter observes that "[t]he meanings of white race reach into concepts of labor, gender, and class and images of personal beauty," underscoring the insidious virility of racial constructs in American life.[182] Efforts by individuals and institutions to assert Syrian whiteness often focused on proving alignment with these broader markers, embodying values, appearances, and practices coded as white in American society.

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[179] Theodore Roosevelt, *Address by President Roosevelt before the National Congress of Mothers*, March 13, 1905, Theodore Roosevelt Collection, MS Am 1541 (315), Harvard College Library, https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o280100.
[180] Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 250, 244.
[181] Tehranian, "Performing Whiteness": 817–48.
[182] Painter, *The History of White People*, xi.

*Letters to Uncle Sam* shows the continuous way Syrians engaged with race science and "racial scripts" narratives to fit within its logic, adapting eugenic discourses to support their case for racial belonging.[183] Rihani, naturalized as an American citizen in 1900, a public intellectual, journalist, and writer, was privy to the need to prove Syrians' civility and whiteness to build legitimacy and gain social status, as he worked to gain favor with the U.S. government through the logics of racial hierarchy. Thus, narratives of whiteness were infused, whether consciously or unconsciously, into his advocacy for his political cause, as he sought ways to affiliate himself and his fellow countrymen with the virtues of whiteness and its benefits. Rihani, aware of the situation in Mexico and his connection to it and to other Syrian narratives, focuses on the connection between whiteness and labor.

**US-Mexico relations**

Just months after the Zimmerman Telegram and amidst the ongoing Mexican revolution, Mexico-American relations were strained.[184] President Venustiano Carranza ruled over a state with rising Mexican nationalism and growing anti-imperialist sentiment. Continuous land incursions and illegal stealing of Mexican land contributed to growing resentment of the "North Americanos" and the Colossus of the North. Disdain of foreign intervention was seen in the 1917 Mexican Constitution, specifically Article 27 which asserted Mexican ownership over its land and resources, requiring foreign governments to be granted permission to use them. At the same time, Mexico's declared neutrality in World War I and the revelation of the German attempt to recruit Mexican support through the Zimmermann Telegram stoked American fears of German infiltration and ideological subversion.

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[183] The concept of Racial scripts is from Molina, Natalia. *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, 21.

[184] Territorial land battles such as The Battle of Columbus, New Mexico in 1916. Land battles between the US and Mexico were central to the reason Mexico stayed out of the war.

These anxieties, compounded by the Revolution's socialist leanings, may have informed Rihani's decision to view Mexico as a strategic site from which to advocate for Syrian loyalty, civilization, and, by implication, whiteness. In this context, portraying Syrians as "white" and therefore suited with American values and could serve U.S. strategic interests. Rihani saw Mexico as a proving ground — an opportunity to assert Syrian-American alignment with U.S. goals and superiority over what many American elites viewed as the "radical" and "tropical" elements of Mexican labor.

As such, Rihani found his direction and his mission in going to Mexico. He traveled to Merida in the Yucatan peninsula, a wealthy town in a region of economic significance due to the booming henequen industry. Henequen, also known as "green gold" was a natural resource used to make binder twine, an essential product used to package U.S. wheat exports to the Allied Powers. In 1915, General Salvador Alvarado came to power and instituted progressive and reformist policies eliminating peonage and dismantling the Hacienda system. His "Five Sisters" program "ended indigenous servitude and launched labor, agrarian, political, and educational reforms, aggressive anticlerical measures, and an ambitious program of state-directed economic modernization financed by the state-controlled Henequen Regulatory Commission."[185] These reforms provoked concern in the United States for two reasons: first, they jeopardized American access to henequen and, by extension, twine critical to the U.S. wartime supply chain; second, they raised alarms about the spread of socialism across the border.

Rihani, acutely aware of these fears, sought to frame Syrian identity in contrast to these racialized tropes. In a pointed address to the U.S. government, he emphasized the critical role of

[185] Paul K. Eiss, "A Revolutionary Postmortem: Body, Memory, and History in Yucatán, Mexico, 1915-2015," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (2018): 669–696, https://doi.org/10.1215/00182168-7160206.

Mexican laborers in controlling henequen production. Rihani states the unstable and problematic dependent relationship as follows:

> "It is the laborers, and not the government, who really control the railways of Yucatan. It is also they, and not the Government of the Reguladora, who control the production and the transportation of hemp. Here then is where your interests, dear Uncle, are involved. For if you must supply your Allies with wheat, you must first supply your farmers with binder twine to harvest their crops…you ought to, in my humble opinion, single out the laborers for your special favor."[186]

Rihani's appeal is unmistakably pragmatic: in order to secure Allied victory, the U.S. must ensure control over its supply chains — starting with the laborers in Yucatán. In this context, Rihani positions himself as a loyal intermediary, aligning Syrians with U.S. imperial interests and distancing them from the racialized labor class of revolutionary Mexico.

**Labor**

Ideas on labor held a core place in constructions of whiteness. Racialized understandings of labor appear throughout Rihani's poetry and prose, particularly in his musings on the Mexican Revolution and the condition of Mexican laborers. Rihani draws on and builds upon the logics of scientific racism where the white man was idealized as industrious, disciplined, and naturally suited for hard work and other races were seen as inferior. Rihani associated Mexican laborers with laziness and moral inferiority linking their supposed indolence to both biology and culture, reinforcing the large discourse that racialized labor as either civilized or degenerate. In contrast, he frames Syrians in Mexico as morally upright, industrious, and aligned with middle-class values - traits that, in the racial science of the day, signified whiteness and civilization.[187]

Race science that linked notions of racial superiority with work ethic delegated menial labor to "degenerate" races. Edward Ross, founder of the field of Sociology in the American

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[186] *Letters*, 32.
[187] See: Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916).

university, and scientist who coined the term "race suicide" writes in *The Causes of Racial Superiority* (1901) that "[t]he economic virtues…are a function of race."[188] Those deemed white were seen to possess an inherent industriousness that justified their social status, while other groups were deemed biologically and temperamentally unable to participate or be fit for democratic governance. Within this racist logic, Mexicans were categorically labeled as lazy, prone to striking, and ideologically threatening, based on fears of socialism and anarchism circulating during the Mexican Revolution. These beliefs were reflected in immigration policy, which sought to bar those who may become "public charges" or could threaten social order. Thus, within this political climate and supremacy of xenophobia, Rihani's writing sought to dissociate Syrians from narratives of un-American labor.

While elites like Ross and Roosevelt propagated discriminatory ideologies targeting workers, organized labor emerged as a key opponent of race science and its use to justify discrimination and dispossession. Founded in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organization challenged this racialized framework by organizing across racial, ethnic, and linguistic lines.[189] They "sought to bring the unskilled, immigrant masses into unions by stressing their interests as workers.[190] Additionally, the IWW as they stated in newspapers such as Il Proletario sought to wage "not a race struggle but class struggle," attempting to unify the working class against capitalist exploitation, regardless of race or origin. [191]

Painter discusses the connection between anti-labor and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, describing WWI "as a time of spiraling labor unrest and anti-immigrant paranoia.

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[188] Painter, *The History of White People*, 252.
[189] See Fahrenthold, *Unmentionables,* 2024. for more information about the central role Syrians placed in labor strikes such as the Bread and Roses Strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. Additionally: Dominique Cadinot. Integrated laborers but marginal figures: the untold story of early Syrian American factory workers. Labor History, 2022, pp.1 - 14. ffhal-03693171f
[190] Painter, *The History of White People*, 254.
[191] Ibid, 255.

Between 1917-1919, a growing cycle of strikes and labor tension alarmed Americans across the political spectrum."[192] During this period were those that "hailed from southern and eastern Europe, the masses of Slavs, Italians, and Jews, many said to be mentally handicapped, prone to disease and un-American ideologies." Although Syrians were a relatively small proportion of immigrants, Rihani's work can be read as a response to these fears. His aim was to demonstrate that Syrians, as a racial group, did not harbor "un-American" ideas or traits but were actually capable of being effective agents of the American empire. Ideologies of racial groups were attributed to entire racial groups and were not just consideration for immigration, but could reflect the attitude of American policy in other realms.[193]

The rise of industrialization and amicable relations between corporations and the state at the turn of the century gave corporations significant power to suppress wages and avoid labor protections. There was growth in the numbers of factory jobs and immigrants were a major source of manpower. The tension between labor organizing and the state was trembling the nation. According to Painter, in the popular imagination, workers "resentment wore an immigrant face."[194] Syrians, in both contemporary and later literature, often sought to escape this image through respectability politics, based on the claim that they were not factory workers but merchants and peddlers. This narrative of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship served to distance Syrians from both labor radicalism and racialized suspicion.

Rihani was making a case against being a threat to America: "[f]or many anxious Americans, the Socialist Party and IWW merged into a huge revolutionary threat to American society, one identified with immigrant "alien races." In the tense hyper-patriotic atmosphere of

[192] Ibid, 291.
[193] Ibid, 293.
[194] Ibid, 294.

wartime, any hint of labor militancy did not play well across the country."[195] Rihani sought to calm these anxieties by positioning Syrians as separate from the chaotic, unruly immigrant masses. His writings work to tick all the boxes of the "model immigrant" — respectable, capitalist, loyal, and racially assimilable.

Yet, it is important to note that this celebratory narrative masks the more complex reality. Rihani tells a story in line with the celebratory stories of migrants. There was significant tension between the respectability politics of the educated elite and the lived experiences of working-class Syrians. While figures like Rihani and later Philip Hitti emphasized business acumen as the hallmark of Syrian identity — Hitti wrote in *The Syrians in America* (1924) that "business is their lodestar… no nook of the world escapes them" this framing served to obscure the participation of Syrians in labor struggles and factory work eliding the diversity of experiences and building of solidarities [196]

The United States government increasingly hostile to labor rights viewed organizing as a threat to national security. Labor was a racialized narrative projected onto the bodies of certain immigrant groups who were seen as inclined toward insubordination. In this context, Rihani's rhetorical strategy of uplifting Syrians as capitalist, civilized, and white can be seen as both a defensive response to racialized labor fears and to align with the dominant values of American industrial modernity.

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[195] Ibid.

[196] Stacy D. Fahrenthold, *Unmentionables: Textiles, Garment Work, and the Syrian American Working Class* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=37216: *Mahjar* political organizing relied on the narrative of a professional working class in order to legitimize political efforts, all the while silencing labor voices, p. 3. For more on the critique of celebratory narratives about Syrians and efforts to recover stories of the Syrian proletariat see Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

**Letters To Uncle Sam as a Piece of Capitalist Propaganda**

Rihani's journey to Mexico during World War I was not merely a cultural or literary endeavor — it was an intentional act of diplomacy aimed to shine a positive light on the Syrians in the eyes of the American public and government. At a moment when Syrians, as former Ottoman subjects, were under suspicion for potential pro-German sympathies, Rihani framed his efforts as a mission to "bring them back to the faith." This "faith" was not religious but ideological — an alignment with capitalist values, pro-Allied loyalty, and the racialized ideals of whiteness and civilization.[197] In his writings, including *Letters to Uncle Sam*, Rihani reveals a deep concern with the perception of Syrians abroad and the shame associated with their marginalization or misalignment from American interests.[198] His rhetorical strategy, then, functioned not only to secure Syrians' place within U.S. society, but also to frame them as vital political and economic allies for America's imperial ambitions abroad.

In addition to organizing Leagues of Liberation and engaging in the broader *mahjar* recruitment efforts, Rihani was engaged in a subtler campaign that positioned Syrians as industrious, civilized, and inherently capitalist, in stark contrast to the local Indigenous laborers of Mexico. Writing from the Yucatán Peninsula gave him a view of a complex labor economy, where henequen production was vital to the U.S. war effort and where Indigenous Maya were recently released from an exploitative system of debt peonage.[199] Yet rather than critique these labor conditions or structures of power, Rihani pathologized the workers themselves. In the one poem included in Letters he writes:

> "But now alas, the children of Chac Mul / And Kulkan and Itza drivel and drool / About equality and social creeds... / They sing the Cucaracha and acclaim / The

[197] Bawardi, *The Making of Arab Americans,* 179–185.
[198] Fahrenthold, *Between the Ottomans and the Entente*, 145–150. Hajjar, *Politics and Poetics*, 41.
[199] Allen Wells, *Yucatán's Gilded Age: Haciendas, Henequen, and International Harvester, 1860–1915* (University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 200–210.

> right to set the henequen aflame / In the sacred name of labor... / Indeed, and they don't give a tinker's dam / If no hemp ever gets to Uncle Sam."[200]

Rihani reminisces on the grandeur of ancient Maya civilization only to cast its present descendants as degenerate, idle, and politically subversive. His critique is steeped in early 20th-century eugenic discourse, particularly the environmental determinism that linked tropical climates to laziness, irrationality, and radicalism. Rather than addressing the systemic exploitation of Indigenous laborers by the hacienda elite, Rihani blames the climate–and by extension the people themselves: "The laborer here, an I.W.W. in one sense, a Bolsheviki in another, remains moreover a creature of tropic influences… I.W.Wism develops lustily in the tropics, where the soil of common sense is but a few centimeters deep."[201] He adds, "The sun is an element that the wise and liberal legislator often fails to consider," implying that neither socialist reforms nor liberal ideals can overcome what he sees as the inherent racial and geographic inferiority of the Mexican worker.[202]

This racialization of Mexican labor was central to illustrating the Syrians as ideal members of empire. In contrast, the Syrian merchant becomes the image of loyalty, productivity, and capitalist spirit. Rihani writes:

> "As for the Syrians, their commercial spirit is immune to Bolshevikism or socialism of any color or shade. They are in Yucatán gradually supplanting the Mayans. Or might they not be walking in the footsteps of their ancestors the Phoenecians... Behold them again in their living descendants the Syrians, who are more numerous and prosperous here than in any other state of Mexico... what they refuse to take for goods they cannot deliver, is safely deposited in U.S.A. Banks."[203]

Rihani draws a direct line between ancient Phoenician traders and contemporary Syrian immigrants, reinforcing a narrative of racial continuity that equates commercial success with

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[200] *Letters*, 29.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid

civilizational superiority. This trope not only elevates Syrians above their Mexican counterparts but aligns them with American economic interests and imperial logics. By emphasizing their immunity to socialism and their usefulness to American manufacturers and banks, Rihani casts Syrians as ideal agents of capitalism, racially acceptable, commercially driven, and politically aligned.

This vision of Syrian superiority served a dual purpose. Domestically, it reinforced Syrians' claims to whiteness and civic inclusion in the United States.[204] Transnationally, it supported the political goal of an independent Greater Syria under U.S. mandate protection. Rihani did not want Syrians to be seen as the next population to be subjugated — whether in the U.S., Mexico, or the Middle East — but rather as co-creators of modernity and allies in the civilizing project of the empire. *Letters* can therefore be read as a piece of racial propaganda, strategically crafted to serve both the Syrian diaspora's social standing and the nationalist aspirations of a liberated Greater Syria. In doing so, Rihani embraced and reproduced many of the racial logics he might elsewhere have been expected to critique, by offering up the Syrian as white, capitalist, and modern precisely by pathologizing the racialized laborer of the tropics.

**Conclusion:**

*Letters To Uncle*, is an evocative example of early 20th-century racial politics — an illustration of how whiteness was not solely policed by state institutions but performed and maneuvered. In Rihani's prose, whiteness becomes a passport — a requisite for belonging and power. He casts Syrians as inheritors of Phoenecian commerce, immune to socialist ills, as diligent agents of capitalism. Resulting in an image of Syrians not as helpless people in need of

[204] Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*, 35–40; Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (University of California Press, 2002).

liberation, but astute collaborators in the machine of empire. The Mexican laborer is the foil: disorderly, and idle, a being not shaped by history or exploitation but by racial degeneration.

Rihanis writing echoes the eugenic rhythms of "racialized nationalism" incorporating the logics of race science and wielding the logic as a tool of persuasion. In vying for a future for Syrians, Rihani speaks in the tongue of the empire, cajoling Uncle Sam with ideas he knows well: labor and racial superiority. Revealing the calculations of claiming belonging through exclusion and owning civility by reproducing hierarchies.

Hence, Letters to Uncle Sam is an important case to examine the racial grammar during WWI, while the boundaries of whiteness were being etched in courts, on borders, and across oceans.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

> "For most of the world, there's no greater symbol of America than the Statue of Liberty. It was designed by a man who traveled widely in this part of the world — and who had originally envisioned his woman bearing a torch as standing over the Suez Canal. Ultimately, of course, it was erected in New York Harbor, where it has been an inspiration to generations of immigrants. One of these immigrants was a poet-writer named Ameen Rihani. Gazing at her lamp held high, he wondered whether her sister might be erected in the lands of his Arab forefathers. Here is how he put it: 'When will you turn your face toward the East, oh Liberty?'" - George W. Bush, "Importance of Freedom in the Middle East," January 13, 2008 [205]

*Letters to Uncle Sam* speaks to the complex racial dynamics and political strategies Rihani was experimenting with. The past four chapters parse Rihani's morphing ideological commitments as a Syrian American organizer and intellectual navigating U.S. imperial rhetoric on a transnational scale.

Chapter One laid the groundwork for the study of the Syrian *mahjar* in North and South America. Syrians sought economic amelioration abroad as the Ottoman territories faced economic and political turmoil. *Mahjar* studies analyze migrant enclaves and economic trajectories, and early literature documented an easy assimilation into whiteness. However, later *mahjar* scholars highlight a partial or lack of full acceptance into whiteness through studying race, class, and political organizing — dimensions previously elided from scholarship. Ameen Rihani's story highlights the presence of transnational political organizing and the expansive network of actors, as he worked to gather Syrians willing to join the U.S. or allied armies as seen in the recruiting efforts of the Syria Mount Lebanon League of Liberation.

Chapter Two locates Rihani's WWI mobilization in time and space, situated at the crossroads of the Ottoman Empire and North and South America. Looking at the motivations and

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[205] George W. Bush., "Importance of Freedom in the Middle East" (speech, Abu Dhabi, UAE, January 13, 2008), National Archives and Records Administration, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080113-1.html#:~:text=For%20most%20of%20the%20world,standing%20over%20the%20Suez%20Canal.

intentions of migration and reception of Syrian migrants in New York shows how economic and sectarian push's figured into migration stories. Attention to the Orientalist and exotifying news coverage of the New York Syrian colony shows the experience of othering that Syrians in the U.S. felt, subject to standards of strict assimilation. It also examined how economic success was central in narratives of Syrian assimilation and the connection between the legacy of Phoenician merchants and Syrian peddlers presented Syrians as agents of capital capable of expanding the U.S. empire. Additionally, the proliferation of the *mahjar* press and Bawardi's uncovering of archives of organizations such as the Free Syria Party show how the SMLLL fit into the broader *mahjar* political field.

Chapter Three looks at how American Syrian activists sought inclusion in the U.S. through mirroring American rhetoric. The tense status of Syrians — their sense of unbelonging and otherness — appeared in the essentialized identities deployed through political organizing. Connections between New York and Mexico went beyond shared newspaper syndicates. As Vice President of the SMLLL, Rihani made a calculated decision, factoring in the precarious affairs in Mexico and his familial connections to Mérida, to spread the word of the American cause. While bringing Syrians "back to the faith" through political activism, he examined ideas of citizenship, rendering Syrians as powerfully grateful and indebted to Uncle Sam. In a zeitgeist of distrust toward immigrants, Rihani's discussion of loyalty can be seen as a conciliatory rejoinder — one that positioned himself as both insider and emissary — a "missionary" of the American cause.

Chapter Four further examines the entrenchment of race in Rihani's advocacy for Syrian belonging in the U.S., based on a capitalist-informed conception of societal worth. Racialized hierarchy constitutes a conversation partner for Rihani. Positioning Syrians as white in contrast to the Indigenous and Mestizo population in Mexico is based on a constructed dichotomy

between Syrian capitalist and Mexican Bolshevik. Thus, Rihani uses racial stereotypes associated with labor to render Syrians white and compatible with the U.S. empire. Nevertheless, Rihani's use of exaggeration and sarcasm throughout *Letters* signals a dubious adoption of the racial standards he was coerced to contend with.

This thesis leads me to imagine Rihani asking a different question than the one quoted by George Bush in 2008. I imagine Rihani saying instead: *When will you turn your face toward Syrians in the United States, oh Liberty?*

Delivered in Abu Dhabi as the U.S. was pulling out of Iraq, Bush's speech weaponized Rihani's Arab identity, quoting *Al-Rihaniyat* to justify America's military intervention on the grounds of democracy and freedom. What this selective citation obscures is that Rihani ultimately saw through the empty prospects of peace, liberty, and freedom symbolized by the Statue of Liberty. After the failures of Wilsonian democracy following World War I, Rihani turned away from faith in U.S. exceptionalism and toward pan-Arab unity — both as a cultural project and as a response to colonial erasure.

The U.S.'s intentional misremembering of Rihani — particularly in the post-9/11 era — attempts to co-opt him as a bridge figure between East and West. But his words, stripped of historical context, serve to vindicate American intervention, erasing both its crimes abroad and its treatment of Arab and Muslim Americans at home.

Rihani's piece of political propaganda highlights the way race and racial logics were embedded in transnational political organizing. As such, *Letters to Uncle Sam* reveals how concepts of citizenship and labor are inextricably linked to racial superiority. In this novella, Syrians' legibility as worthy citizens depended on their ability to assimilate to U.S. racial logics — to be seen as white, successful, loyal, and modern.

Rihani's performance of whiteness was a mode to gain legitimacy within the U.S. Yet his existence and activities cannot easily be boiled down to a singular identity nor nationality. Both as a political activist and writer Rihani bore a mosaic of affiliations as seen when incorporating American cultural references and racial logic while working among Syrians living in New York and Mexico. His writing drew upon American and Eurocentric epistemologies—ideologies built on racial science and hierarchy—while simultaneously envisioning expansive Syrian futures.

*Letters to Uncle Sam* offers insight into the racist moment Rihani lived in, and the limits of both structural and legal change. Over the past century, we have continued to witness the erosion of citizenship and the endurance of racial nationalism. Rihani envisioned a future of mutual recognition—between Arabs and Americans, between liberty and belonging—but that future was imagined through language steeped in exclusion. What he exposed, and what still lingers, is that the promise of liberty was, and remains, conditional.

Rihani shows the ways in which citizenship has *always* been contingent. It might now be less explicit in law, but the threads of injustice remain woven into the U.S. fabric — and they are being tugged on, unraveling the very fabric of society. The first impacted are those not fully woven into the fabric.

Rihani's legacy reveals that exclusion cannot be the path to lasting belonging. But it also shows that racialized belonging, however tenuous, can shape transnational strategy. Political movements may cross borders, but they are still spoken in the language of the state. Rihani spoke in imperial frequencies. And hindsight shows that, despite his rhetorical dexterity, the full privileges of citizenship and whiteness were never fully secured for Syrians and Arabs in America.

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