

CROSS-WORLD NARRATIVES AND TRAVELS: RECONSTRUCTING THE HISTORY OF EARLY SYRIAN-AMERICAN IMMIGRANTS

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Abstract: Narratives of travel are part of world literature and cultural history. Scholarly research on migrant narratives and literature is a subfield of intercultural studies and comparative literature which allow cultures to bond and interact. Written histories of Arab Americans start with the Foundational Period (1880-1920) which revolves around the early immigrants from Historical Syria. This period is one of the least documented eras which is still difficult to reconstruct due to its many gaps and various obstacles. This paper examines the strategies and approaches used by Philip Hitti, the founder of Arabic Studies in the United States, who established the master models and approaches for the study of the Syro-Lebanese immigrant community. This model is based on locating alternative sources that include—in addition to official sources and written accounts—folksongs, literary texts, popular stories, and personal memories. It makes use of them to reconstruct the history of this community, which is characterized by its rich popular culture and long tradition of story-telling. There may be polemics and prejudices in presenting the wealth of the oral and cultural tradition of Historical Syria's communities in the mainstream popular and official narratives about Arabs and Muslims. When presented with scholarly research and comparative perspectives, immigrants' narratives can have a valuable contribution to world literature on immigration.

Keywords: Narrative, travel, Syria-American, immigrant, literature.

INTRODUCTION

Narratives of travel, as a reflection of experiences and journeys, are part of the cultural history of all communities and countries (Marks, 2024). Such narratives highlight the nuance of exploration, adventures and challenges posed by individuals (Bachelet, 2019). Accounts of immigration and resettlement occupy a central stage in the national historiography of young nations, such as the different countries of the New World. For instance, in countries of the New World, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, these narratives are foundational to understanding their development and identity formation (George & Selimos, 2019; Elder, 2020; Spickard, P., Beltrán, F., & Hooton, L, 2022). The tales of immigrants and settlers highlight the struggles, hopes, and aspirations

that have shaped these nations' histories and cultures.

Scholarly research on migrant narratives and literature is a subfield of intercultural studies and comparative literature which allow cultures to bond and interact (Ryu & Tuvilla, 2018; Bertacco & Vallorani, 2021; Crawley & Jones, 2021). Such research delves into the personal and collective experiences of migrants, exploring themes of displacement, adaptation, and cultural integration. By examining these narratives, scholars can uncover the complex interactions between different cultures and how they influence one another. This field of study not only enhances our understanding of migration but also fosters cultural bonding and interaction, promoting empathy and mutual respect among diverse communities. Through

the lens of migrant literature, we gain insights into the human condition and the universal quest for belonging and identity.

Many books and articles were published on all the stages of American Arab history (Ayalon, 2016; Fadda, 2019; Rashed, 2019). Arab Americans, like all other communities, have endeavoured to write their history, which covers approximately two centuries. Those who wanted to write the complete history of the community had to excavate the foundational stage, which is called “the first intensive wave”, that extends between 1880 and 1920. There are also a few scattered incidents prior to that. The excavation will always take the search back into a predominantly Syrian history because almost all Arabs who lived in America before 1920 immigrated from the historic region of Syria (also called Greater Syria or *Bilad al-Sham*). They mainly migrated from modern Syria and Lebanon. The words “Syrians” and “Syro-Lebanese” continued to be used at that period for all Arabic-speaking immigrants (Semaan, 2014). Hence, every book that relates the story of Arab Americans will start with the foundational period that extends for more than four decades and mainly revolves around the early Syrian immigrants (Gualtieri, 2019; Khater, 2019; Fadda, 2019).

METHOD

The objective of this research is to explore the history of Syrian migration to America especially the four missing episodes and the obstacles. This research also describes the historical narratives presented in Philip Hitti's works. To achieve these objectives, a systematic approach to library research will be employed. A thorough literature review will be conducted to identify key sources such as books, journals, and historical documents. This will involve searching library catalogs, academic databases, and digital archives for relevant materials.

Once the sources are gathered, a content analysis will be performed to examine the themes and narratives presented in the literature. A comparative analysis will then be conducted to compare these findings with the accounts in Philip Hitti's historical series, noting similarities, differences, and unique insights.

The synthesis phase will involve integrating the findings from various sources to create a comprehensive historical narrative. This narrative will highlight the contributions and challenges faced by Syrian immigrants and discuss how these findings align or contrast with Hitti's works. The final report will include an introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and analysis, comparison with Philip Hitti's series, conclusion, and references.

Throughout the research process, the evaluation of sources for relevance and credibility will be crucial. Notes will be organized thematically using digital tools like EndNote, Zotero, or Mendeley. The data synthesis will involve thematic and chronological analyses to identify common themes and significant events over time. The comparative analysis with Hitti's works will critically assess the accuracy, biases, and perspectives of his narratives.

The report will be drafted following a structured outline, starting with sections that are most confident to the researcher, and will undergo peer review for feedback before final submission. The expected outcome of this research is a detailed historical account of Syrian migration to America, providing valuable insights and a critical comparison with Philip Hitti's historical narratives. This method ensures a comprehensive and academically rigorous exploration of the history of Syrian migration to America.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four Missing Episodes and Four Obstacles

While the last century in the history of Arab Americans (including the Syrians) has relatively received and is still receiving good attention in academia and publishing, the previous decades is a grey and undefined area. In comparison to other nationalities and ethnic groups of early immigrants, the history of early Arab immigrants, i.e., the Syrians, is one of the least documented and is still to be researched. Otherwise, the unfinished historiography of early Syrian Americans will be a lost episode of the Arab-American history and even of the American history as a whole.

Recent decades witnessed a revival of studies on early Syrian immigrants. New studies that apply modern theories and approaches were encouraged. They had good

chances of publication and wide readership. However, this persistent and diligent pursuit was faced with many stumbling blocks. The main challenge is the lack of information as well as the scarcity of sources that provide details about early immigrants. The main missing episodes are the spatio-temporal original context on when these immigrants were born and lived before immigrating; the trip; the arrival; and the first stage of their resettlement in their new home. These four missing episodes were and are still difficult to reconstruct because of many obstacles that can be categorized as follows:

One: The difficulty in tracing back the family roots and history of the early immigrants, which is due to many reasons, including the quick assimilation and return migration. Another important reason is the inclination among early Syrian immigrants to be discreet to avoid discrimination for political reasons.

Two: The scarcity of official records, reports, documents, and chronicles that reserve the necessary data. The biggest incident was the loss and destruction of most records of the Ellis Island Immigration Station which was the main gateway of new arrivers. On June 15, 1897, a fire of unknown origin, turned the wooden structures on Ellis Island into ashes. As a consequence, most of the immigration records dating back to 1855 were destroyed. Ellis Island is a central theme in all narratives that followed the immigrants' stories of arrival at their new home. In addition, official records include numerous errors in defining the identity of Syrians which occurred during the registration of Syrians who carried Turkish passports during the Ottoman period.

Three: There is a shortage of written personal narratives about individuals and groups that can include relevant data. There are many reasons behind the deficiency of written personal narratives, including memoirs; diaries; biographies and autobiographies; and family histories that include essential information about early Syrian immigrants. The main reason is the difficulty among Syrian immigrants in undergoing social and cultural interaction, as most of whom were fleeing civil conflicts and economic difficulties. It was also due to the hardship they faced in the early stage of resettling. The community included many

intellectuals, journalists, publishers, performers, and also writers and poets, such as Khalil Gibran and the rest of the renowned members of the group of Pen League. However, they lived in economic hardship and mostly worked as peddlers and travelling salesmen.

Four: The decline of the grounds of cultural exchange and daily socialization that reserve the culture of those early immigrants. The demographic changes in American cities during mid-20th century had a big impact on many immigrant communities, including the Syrian American community. These changes were accompanied by the demolition of venues that provided meeting contexts for cultural life and daily interaction among early Syrian immigrants. The most vital among these grounds was the area known as "Little Syria" in Manhattan. This area, which is also called the "Syrian Quarter", was the biggest of several ones called "The Syrian Colonies". Little Syria was the main residential district of early Syrian immigrants and was a vibrant shopping area full of cafes, restaurants, and cultural centres. For decades, these places of sociability and entertainment in Little Syria were the reservoir of their oral culture and popular tradition.

The unavailability of sources about the four vague segments of the story—the original context, the trip, the arrival, and the early resettlement—led to major gaps in all narratives that attempted to write the history of early immigrants. Modern academic research that aim to reconstruct these missing episodes rely on alternative methods that are available in modern cultural studies. The following section will examine the strategies and approaches used by a pioneer in the field who produced the master historical narrative on the subject, which inspired successive generations of researchers and historians.

Philp Hitti: Historical Stories

The first research in the field was produced by the renowned Syro-Lebanese historian Philip Hitti (1886-1978) who was the founder of Arabic Studies in the United States. He was the professor of Arabic, Middle Eastern, and Islamic studies in Princeton and Harvard Universities. His book *The Syrians in America* (1924) is the first academic research to be published about the history of the Syrian immigrants. This book is considered a major

reference on Arab Americans in general, and is heavily quoted and referenced in academic teaching and research. It is still the most significant book, not only on Syrian Americans, but also on Arab Americans in general. This is because it presented the foundational part of the Arab American history. Most importantly, it laid a firm ground work for all subsequent research on Arab Americans. In many places in the book, Hitti resorted to folktales, folksongs, anecdotes, personal chit-chat, and family stories. When quoting tales, news, and testimonies from books and media in order to support his argument and illustrate his explanation with verified examples, he employed the comparative study approach.

In his introductory section, Hitti defined the homeland of the early immigrants and the interaction between Levantine cities through a folksong that narrates the story of a man travelling from his town in modern Lebanon to Damascus and warns the lonely wife left behind of her husband's trip to the enticing place. The song says "Thy husband, O beauteous one, has ventured on a trip to Damascus all alone" (Hitti, 1924). Hitti stated that it was his favourite song. He and described it as one of the popular songs in the latter part of 19th century that embodies details of the topography and the socio-cultural history of the region. This song also illustrates the image of Damascus as the animated trade centre of the region, which is also associated with leisure and pleasure. This narrative popular song had crossed the ocean in the historian's mind and survived in the book.

In the following parts, Hitti analyses the factors that forced early immigrants to leave their homeland and come to America, and the challenges they faced in their new home. In the chapter titled "Education", he related stories on the situation of education back home and the official restrictions put by Ottoman authorities on cultural and educational work. He introduced the stories by saying that the situation of education "is illustrated in a story about a sheikh who was one day confronted with a brief written document". Hitti narrates in a literary satirical style the anecdote about this pretentious illiterate sheikh who failed to read the simple statement and requested to know its content first. For the situation of cultural life, Hitti describes it as "illustrated by the story of the Turkish censor who objected to

the admission into the country of a printing press" (Hitti, 1924). The inclusion of stories and the wording of the narration highlight a pioneering attempt to extend the ability of the historical discussion to involve various unconventional sources and narrative systems. The abundant recurrence of the two phrases "is illustrated in the story of", or "is illustrated by the story of" throughout his book also demonstrates the power of folk literature and story-telling as well as their ability to convey information and support argument.

In addition to the stories which he transmitted from relatives and acquaintances, Hitti sometimes contemplated and elaborated on certain incidents to turn them into narrative themes. In these passages, he transformed into a fine universal story-teller and dignified the stories of his courageous countrymen by displaying them under the comparative light of some esteemed stories in world culture. The stories of early Syrian immigrants whom Hitti called "sons of Syria", were masterfully integrated in the American history and presented as having a comparative significance to the popular tales about heroic deeds and events that inform the myth of the American nation, such as the stories of Abraham Lincoln and James A. Garfield, the two American presidents who were associated with the American civil war and abolition of slavery. They were assassinated and turned into romantic heroes in the American popular literature and culture. Their biographies were constructed based on many accumulated stories and oral narratives. Hitti contemplated, "I have particular names in mind as I write, and the tale of the bravely endured hardships of some of these sons of Syria who have made good in many far-off lands would match the romantic story of Garfield or Lincoln" (Hitti, 1924).

Hitti followed the news of the Syrian communities both in their travels as peddlers as well as in their cultural and intellectual activities in their major areas of concentration across the Syrian Colonies", especially Manhattan's Little Syria. Little Syria or the Syrian Quarter was a neighbourhood that existed in the lower west side of Manhattan borough in New York from the late 1880s until the 1940s. It was centred on Washington Street and predominantly populated by Christians from Greater Syria. Most of the immigrants'

stories as well as their old and new memories which Hitti quoted and analysed were narrated directly to him. They passed on to him by word of mouth or circulated in the streets of Little Syria and its popular cafés.

The wording that preceded his quotations such as “I heard”, and “I was told”, etc., indicated that Hitti, the father of Arab American historians, has spent years living in the Syrian Colonies among the community members, listening to them and gathering their stories. These fictional devices made his valuable scholarly research an interesting read for the American public as well as for Arab American scholars who valued it and defined it as “The first story of immigration here from the Middle East” (Kayal, 2002).

Hitti also researched the correspondences between immigrants and their communities. He examined the exchanged stories in these letters closely. He fabricated stories of thriving businesses, successful projects, and quick wealth travelled back in the post crossing the ocean towards families and friends in Syrian hometowns and neighbourhoods. He fuelled their imaginations and dreams. In re-narrating some of these stories, Hitti maintained the story-telling devices and used figurative wording and metaphoric language. He also analysed and described these stories’ mode of reception. He remarked, “The fabulous stories recorded in the epistles of the emigrants regarding the volume of wealth in the United States and the facility with which it can be acquired spread like wildfire” (Hitti, 1924).

Hitti, who was an authority in the field of Arabic Studies, was a great collector of stories that revolved around historical facts. He rewrote them in a vivid imaginative style that demonstrated his creative and inventive skills. In one of these accounts, which he called “thrilling stories”, he narrated the life-story of one of the early immigrants who came to America as a student and worked as a teacher of Arabic, Greek, and Latin (Dibs, 2020). Hitti narrated, “The first Syrian to enter the United States was a Lebanese, Antonius al-Bishallany, who landed in Boston in 1854. The thrilling story of this Syrian youth, sounds more like a drama than a real story”. Hitti visited al-Bishallany’s tomb which is still standing in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn and describes it as carrying an epitaph under the figures of a

lion, a serpent, and a lamb which was “designed to represent his fearlessness, wisdom, and blamelessness” (Hitti, 1924).

Hitti did not always disclose the sources of his stories. However, his book reserves some of the most intricate details about the trips of early immigrants and recovers some of the lost data of arrival at Ellis Island. In one of these thrilling stories, he rewrote in a colourful dramatic mode, using the techniques of visual storytelling. He narrated, “An idea of the dread of those debarred may be gained from the story of the fourteen-year-old lad who, arm broken and clad in clothes double his size, paddled along from Ellis Island to the New Jersey shore, and risked his life for liberty” (Hitti, 1924).

Sometimes, the presented facts indicated that Hitti had searched for more details in the press, archives, and published books. It was also indicated that he interviewed involved people to complete the story and support his argument with appropriate evidence:

“The number of those who sought entry and were debarred, mainly because of trachoma, is considerable. But that in many cases injustice was done is illustrated by the story of the two Syrian boys, with ‘trachoma’, admitted by President Roosevelt and told by Senator Hoar in his autobiography”.

Hitti quotes Hoar who said:

“The Ellis Island authorities ruled that the mother might land to join her husband in Worcester, Mass., but the children must be sent back in the ship upon which they arrived. Half an hour from the receipt of the dispatch, Roosevelt sent a peremptory order to New York to let the children come in. Later on, while Roosevelt was visiting Worcester, the two children, whose disorder of the eyes turned out not to be contagious at all, but only caused by the glare of the water and the hardships of the voyage, were presented to him” (Hitti, 1924; Hoar, 1903).

Hitti carefully devised his innovative strategy of historical studies which encompassed elements of different genres and modes of oral tradition, literary narratives, and written accounts. After collecting the stories, Hitti verified them by exploring their extensions and extracting evidences from other official sources including media, political reports, archives, and official documents. This was evident in the section in which he related the stories surrounding the Street Riot of 1905

in Little Syria (Hitti, 1924). In addition to his contributions to writing the early history of Arab Americans, this great scholar preserved stories and folktales of immigrants and gave them credibility as viable sources of information, especially when no other sources are available.

CONCLUSION

Historical research becomes more profound and extensive as it rampages through parts that are unaccounted for or disregarded in the written histories of past human experiences. It employs different tools to compensate for missing episodes and to bridge the gaps. The pioneering studies of Philip Hitti established master models and approaches that can help historians who attempt to write the history of Syro-Lebanese immigrant community. This strategy is based on locating alternative sources that include

folksongs, literary texts, popular stories, and personal memories and make use of them to reconstruct the history of this community, which is characterized by its rich popular culture and long tradition of story-telling. Recovering lost historical episodes is an ongoing large collective project which incorporates academic research, historical studies, literature, arts, and social media. Polemics and prejudices in the mainstream popular and official narratives about Arabs and Muslims can occur in presenting the wealth of the oral and cultural tradition of the Historical Syria communities. The world research on the cultural legacy of early immigrants occupies a prominent stage in the fields of comparative and intercultural studies. When presented within scholarly research, immigrants' narratives can have a valuable contribution to World Literature.

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