

# Race, Gender, and Work: Syrian-Lebanese Women in Turn-of-the Century Sao Paulo

José D. Najjar

## Introduction

Recently the study of the Syrian-Lebanese communities in Latin America has attracted much attention from scholars across a variety of disciplines (Klich & Lesser, 1998; Zobel, 2006; Akmir, 2009). Although the impact of this emerging body of scholarship has greatly contributed to our understanding of non-European immigrants to Latin America and their contribution to their adoptive countries, less attention has been paid to the roles and experiences of Syrian-Lebanese women or women of Syrian-Lebanese descent. Even less attention has been paid to their transnational experiences. Syrian-Lebanese women are often referenced only in passing and are typically depicted as homebound, or as women of leisure engaged in charitable work. Many of these trivial and anecdotal glimpses into the lives of Syrian-Lebanese women in Brazil reflect and reinforce the constant reproduction of gender and color hierarchies in Brazilian nationalist ideology. There has been even less focus on questions pertaining to the privileged white status the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants enjoyed upon their arrival in Brazil.

The accumulation of wealth by members of the Syrian-Lebanese community has been commonly associated with the prominent iconic figure of the Syrian-Lebanese peddler, as both a historical agent and as part of the larger social imaginary. There is little question that in Brazil by the turn of the 19th century most Syrian-Lebanese immigrants were employed as peddlers or were merchants who employed their countrymen as peddlers. Women's absence from the historical record further supports the idea that women did not engage in peddling as a way to make a living. However, there is evidence to suggest that Syrian-Lebanese women, except at the elite level, were found in occupations traditionally associated with their male counterparts. As a white immigrant group, their white privilege allowed them to participate in the emerging capitalist labor market boom at the turn-of-the century in São Paulo. In 19th century São Paulo, color, ethnicity, and race, in relationship to whiteness, became part of a homogeneous ideology associated with certain social privileges; in turn these privileges often reinforced gender and class social standards.

## Syrian-Lebanese Women in the United States and Brazil: Towards a Comparative Dialogue

In "Gendering the Chain Migration Thesis," Sara Gualtieri dissects crucial unquestioned components of what she calls the Syrian Transatlantic Migration

in United States historiography.<sup>1</sup> She notes that, for the most part, the available literature has supported the classic example of chain migration in which young men were the first links and were later joined by wives or fiancées. Challenges to this dominant narrative came from the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Alixa Naff and Afif Tannous (See the pioneering works of Naff, 1985, and Tannous, 1943). The works of Naff and Tannous demonstrated the vital role of Syrian-Lebanese women as important actors in the immigration process and how Syrian-Lebanese women were crucial players in developing a Syrian peddling economic niche. Female peddling was commonly understood to be a practice based on patriarchal consent, supported by the discovery of the economic value of women's labor. An alternative interpretation points to the collapse of patriarchal rule, both in society and within the family, as a reason for the incursion of women into peddling. As a whole, these two diametrically opposed theses point to the gradual incursion of women into public life and to a slow process of self-emancipation.

The historiography on the Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil fundamentally centers on the notion of ethnic unity, the male immigration experience, and social mobility in the context of the post-emigration experience. As a result, these studies have over-imposed a gendered and biased narrative in which male experiences have saturated not only the historical record but also the community's historical memory. Second, most available works lack rigorous analysis of the experiences of the Syrian-Lebanese immigrants during the early years of their arrival in Brazil, especially against the backdrop of important processes such as the end of slavery and the rise of Brazil's republican government. Furthermore, the historiography on immigration to Brazil tends to look at the Brazilian government as the main actor in the adoption of racial laws which encourage European immigration in order to meet the 'shortage' of human labor in post-abolition Brazil and in order to 'whiten' the Brazilian population. Yet these views fail to account for the role of the immigrant in the exclusion of the Brazilian Black population from the emerging labor market.

Concurrently, one major theme in Syrian-Lebanese historiography highlights economic success as the facilitating force behind Syrian-Lebanese inclusion in the socio-economic fabric of the Brazilian nation state. The ostensibly closed networks built by the Syrian-Lebanese, based on ethnic unity and entrepreneurship, provide partial answers to the emergence of community organizations and their objectives, but they alone cannot sufficiently explain the constant claims of exceptional social mobility. In many ways, the larger picture sketched by the available studies on the Syrian-Lebanese of Brazil offers, in great depth, crucial insights for understanding social mobility and integration from top to bottom – an elite narrative. At a cross-ethnic and national level, the body of literature supports a trend highlighting the 'rags to riches' discourse that is prevalent in many immigration chronicles. But these studies fail to illustrate, let alone acknowledge, the white privilege held by the Syrian-Lebanese upon their arrival, a privilege which all racial groups in different ways help to perpetuate and use to their advantage (Lipsitz, 1998). Were Syrian-Lebanese women at the turn of the nineteenth century as likely as black women to peddle in São Paulo? Was color a factor in the division of labor among working women, especially after the proclamation of the Old Republic? How do color and gender, as intertwined categories of analysis, aid our understanding of everyday life in São Paulo?

1. For an in depth analysis, see Sarah Gualtieri, 2004.

## The Peddler Myth

What we know about Syrian-Lebanese women in the historiography can only be understood in contrast to the representation of Syrian-Lebanese men. Beginning in the 1930s, Syrian-Lebanese community intellectuals linked the community's social and economic mobility to the *mascate* (peddler). The *mascate* stood alone as a signifier of economic prosperity enjoyed by elite members of the Syrian-Lebanese community in Brazil and other states in the western hemisphere. The male peddler embodied social mobility, adventure, and masculinity. In short, it was a nationalist metaphor similar to that of the Brazilian *bandeirante* (colonial scout). Also, the *mascate* symbolized hard work and perseverance. Its symbolism is commonly evoked by the different generations of Syrian-Lebanese businessmen and has served to reinforce both Brazil's racial democracy myth as well as the supposedly humble origins of the community. In contemporary São Paulo, the collective memory of the peddler stands at odds with today's peddlers or street vendors, which are known as *camelôs* (Karam, 2006). In the world of the commercially vibrant 25 de Março Street in São Paulo, the Syrian-Lebanese, now store owners, discriminate against the poor peddlers, usually migrants from the Northeast, because of the economic competition they pose.

Far from a fair representation of the Syrian-Lebanese community, the image of the peddler stands not only for economic success but also suggests a male-dominated version of history wherein Syrian-Lebanese men are highlighted as explorers and precursors of the extensive capitalist networks throughout the unexplored regions of the new host nation. It is an allegory of the well-known historical icon of the *bandeirantes*, who partook in the exploration of Portuguese America. The Syrian-Lebanese intellectual elite appropriated symbolic elements of the *bandeirante*: masculinity, exploratory spirit, and economic ambition – and superimposed those elements onto the *mascate* ideal. The masculinization of this community symbol excluded Syrian-Lebanese women as equal partners in the exploration and exploitation of Brazil and Brazilian resources and, most importantly, elided any female contribution to both the ethnic and the national historical narratives. The fallacy of the peddler icon is nothing but an intellectual shortcut used by community members to obscure the economic benefits based on their color status in Brazil. In reality it was the successful business owners who served as role models for the many Syrian-Lebanese immigrants arriving in the city of São Paulo seeking to amass fortunes. The production and gendering of the peddler in the collective memory of the Syrian-Lebanese community functioned as a space that actualized and reorganized the imaginary, using language as the key to meaning and identity, not just as an instrument of expression.

Mirroring social conditions, representations of Syrian-Lebanese women stood diametrically opposed to their relationship to men. Based upon the republican womanhood model, Syrian-Lebanese women appeared to operate within the confines of the home. They were portrayed as patiently caring for the household and the children. Outside the home, they were expected to either go to church or to perform chores that could not be done inside the house. As devoted wives, they occupied a subservient position as they patiently waited for the return of their courageous men.

The symbolic marriage between the *mascate* and the Republican woman icons contributed to the insertion of the Syrian-Lebanese community into the national

historical narrative by drawing parallels between the *bandeirante* and traditional forms of Republican womanhood. This fictional self-proclamation by the Syrian-Lebanese elite forced the adaptation of a community's discourse that was very much in sync with the state's official one. On a different level, the development of the *mascate* as a foundational figure of the Syrian-Lebanese man, along with the representation of Syrian-Lebanese women as Republican women, reaffirmed the Brazilian elite's system of social values. The outcome of these processes not only contributed to the perpetuation of gender hierarchies but to the adoption of color hierarchies.

### Peddling and White Privilege

Generally, studies which dealt with issues of race, ethnicity, and national identity and which focused on the Syrian-Lebanese of Brazil have highlighted the notion of neither white nor black to locate Syrian-Lebanese racial identity within the larger Brazilian racial gamut (Lesser, 1999). This argument situates the Syrian-Lebanese as an ambiguous group whose racial characteristics fit neither the Eurocentric model of whiteness nor that of blackness. The fallacy of this argument lies in the failure of scholars to take into account two different complementary discourses of whiteness: one racial (phenotypic and genotypic) and the other one cultural. The former is based on biological, Eurocentric assumptions regarding racial supremacy. The latter is informed by the cultural and intellectual currents that divided the globe between civilized and barbarian societies. Jeffret Lesser's analysis of the economic and political debates over the non-African and non-European migrants in Brazil located the Syrian-Lebanese in a state of socio-political ambivalence in which they are "simultaneously insiders...and...outsiders" (Lesser, 1999, p. 42). They were insiders in the religious sense, because most Syrian-Lebanese were Christian, and outsiders because they were not clustered into the "white, black, red, or yellow" races.

A different approach to the study of race, color, and ethnicity of the Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil would place these markers at the forefront of our analysis and deal with their relation to power structures based on Brazil's hierarchy of color. In *White on Arrival*, Thomas A. Guglielmo challenges the generally accepted notion that European immigrants to the United States were classified as 'in-between people' who only became fully white over time and after a great deal of struggle.<sup>2</sup> In the case of Italian immigrants, Guglielmo maintained that Italians never occupied a social position of in-between colored and/or white because their color status was neither challenged nor sustained. Guglielmo's contentions mirror the conventional and common racial and color classification of the Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil. For example, since their arrival at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Syrian-Lebanese's color status was unquestioned since they were considered simultaneously to be racially inferior Turks and privileged whites (Truzzi, 2000). This contention becomes more apparent when the experiences of the Syrian-Lebanese in Brazil are compared to those of Afro-Brazilians, Indigenous Brazilians, and Asian immigrants. To employ uncritically the concept of race, and to some extent ethnicity, is to uphold racial discourses which in themselves hold together a set of often contrasting theories, practices, and institutions of power, since race as a concept has neither a precise nor an imprecise meaning. Additionally, failure to challenge the neither-black-nor-white, in-between-peoples discourse in the Brazilian context would directly mean the reformulation and validation of the already obsolete notion of Brazilian racial democracy and its racist undertones.

2. European immigrants were generally better accepted and treated than other non-European social groups in U.S. society. (See Thomas A. Guglielmo, 2003).

The experiences of Syrian-Lebanese peddlers, both men and women, in São Paulo need to be understood within the context of the division of labor across racial lines. Peddling in São Paulo, for the most part, was an occupation monopolized by Europeans and Middle Easterners in the late nineteenth century. In *Sírios e Libaneses e Seus Descendentes na Sociedade Paulista*, Oswaldo Truzzi looks at the interconnected socio-economic and political relationships between the Syrian-Lebanese community and other competing economic and political actors in the Paulista economy (See Truzzi, 2000). He argues that by being willing to extend credit to their clients for up to one year at a time, a practice that few other ethnic groups were able or willing to do, the Syrian-Lebanese successfully refashioned and invented popular trade. In turn, the Brazilian society associated the Syrian-Lebanese community's image in a very clear way with commerce and commercial entrepreneurship. The successful and popular economic practices employed by the Syrian-Lebanese peddlers created resentment among their competitors, among them Italians, Germans, and Brazilians of Portuguese ancestry.

Regardless of the tension among peddlers, what is evident here is the fact that non-whites were excluded from the economic benefits of peddling. After the end of slavery and during what should have been a major labor adjustment, the black population and members of the new wave of immigrants should have come together in the revamped post-slavery labor market (Domingues, 2003). However, this was not the case. The predilection for European immigrant labor among the Paulista elite supplanted the black population's labor force in practically all important labor activities. Thus, the waves of immigrants and the systematic destitution of black communities generated a new racialized social environment in which the white immigrants not only monopolized the job market and other important employment positions, but also monopolized many aspects of public space: streets, public schools, housing, etc. In this regard, Syrian-Lebanese women benefited from their white privilege as they ventured into the job market, either as peddlers or as business owners.

### Women's Work Against Adversity

In 1988, the publication of *Memórias da Imigração: libaneses e sírios em São Paulo*, an edited volume of oral histories by both men and women, advanced our knowledge of the individual experiences of the earliest pioneers who settled in São Paulo.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, the accounts provided by some of the women reiterated the dominant narrative of the community's social mobility in Brazil. For example, one of the participants, Latife Racy, emphasized the experience of her father, the intrepid male, as part of her family history. The focus of Racy's story and of other women in the volume shifted constantly to prioritize the experiences of the community's men. The accumulation of wealth and the spirit of adventure appeared to be gendered in the processes of memory recollection. However, *Memórias da Imigração* occasionally allowed the experiences of women to disrupt the molded structure of the community's official story and facilitated the emergence of what some would call the exception to the rule.

A case in point is that of Josefina Bardawil, who was born in Zahle, Lebanon, in February, 1918. After the death of her father, her mother, Anice Bu-Hamra, asked her four brothers to come to Brazil and work in a textile factory that was owned by her

3. The work of Betty Loeb Greiber et al., 1998, provides a variety of oral histories mainly from early immigrants to São Paulo.

mother's family in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará. At the age of 26, she emigrated to Brazil with her husband Deratan at the request of her brothers. After living with her siblings for a year, Josefina felt that she needed her own space and her own home. Soon the couple moved to São Paulo. Over the years, Josefina resented her marriage to Deratan. As a young woman she had dated a few men but her family allowed her to marry Deratan only, an international correspondent for the *Al Nochel* newspaper. From her house in São Paulo, Josefina sold imported fabrics that her husband sent her from France. It was a lucrative business. Unfortunately for Josefina, she never reaped the economic benefits of her own labor. It was Josefina's husband, Deratan, who kept all the money, to the very last penny. But Josefina's exploitation didn't end there. Every Sunday, Josefina cooked for the many friends her husband invited over for lunch; sometimes there were up to 20 cars parked outside of her house. Deratan used to invite people to come to have lunch prepared every Sunday by Josefina and stay the whole day. Cooking for these guests led to a situation where domestic chores became essential business transactions for solidifying community relationships, especially those between Josefina's husband and other community members.

After many years, Josefina left her husband. She had no children by him, something that made her very happy. However, the separation from her husband failed to provide an equal separation of their communal wealth. As a young bride, Josefina entered her marriage with £180,000 (British pounds) which were used for the construction of their home. Because all legal transactions were made under her husband's name, she walked away from the marriage empty-handed. After her husband's death, Josefina learned that her husband had donated their fortune to charity and other family members. Even after his death, the economic decisions made by Josefina's husband preserved his legacy as a generous gentleman, a savvy businessman, and an adventurous pioneer both among members of his community and outsiders. Yet Josefina's account problematizes and challenges the narrative of male economic mobility that is so profoundly embedded in the historiography. Even if the process of immigration did permit her to move away from the traditional extended Middle Eastern family nexus, any sort of independence gained through her own labor failed because of her position in the gendered Brazilian social hierarchy.

For other women, such as Lamia Diab, the exploitation of her womanhood went beyond the limits of the migratory process.<sup>4</sup> Lamia Diab's grandfather on her mother's side was the first to emigrate to Brazil at the turn of the century. Her father followed. Upon her father's arrival in São Paulo, he became a merchant with the help of his cousins. He bought and sold beans, rice, even becoming involved in the coffee trade. After some time, he bought a small ranch where he grew different types of fruit. However, he soon sold part of it to dedicate more time to his gas station business.

Lamia spent part of her youth in the city of Kafarakabi where she, like her siblings, attended the local school. The villagers made a living crocheting and knitting; everyone worked for a living. The devastation of World War I interrupted everyday life for the entire village. At the beginning of the war, Lamia and her cousin left Lebanon and sought refuge in Syria. At the age of 16 or 17 she married. In retrospect, she could not make sense of why she married at such a young age. She rationalized her marriage as an event that was born out of a lack of common sense, born out

4. The oral testimony of Lamia Diab is part of a series of oral histories held by the Museo da Imigração Setor de História Oral at the Memorial do imigrante Museum of the State of São Paulo, *Série Depoimentos*, No. 58 (1998).



of the war's torments. During the war, people often got hungry. Luckily for her, the war had not reached the region of Syria that she lived in and the locals continued to attend to their crops. In order to gather some wheat, the only source of foodstuff for Lamia and other refugees, her countrymen exercised their male privilege and coerced Lamia to marry against her will a Lebanese man who worked in the wheat fields.

After the war ended, Lamia and her husband returned to Lebanon. As normality returned to her life, Lamia grew resentful of her husband's gambling problem, which left her family in a precarious financial state. Aware of this situation, her father asked her to come to Brazil with her children and if she so desired, with her husband. Lamia knew very little about Brazil. Most of what she knew about this distant land came from the correspondence between her and her father, or from her neighbors who either had lived in Brazil or knew someone living there. Yet the one thing Lamia knew about Brazil, aside from a bad reputation among villagers, was the fact that Brazil had a large Black population. Prior to her emigration to Brazil, some of the town people asked Lamia if she was taking her blonde and cute little son to the Blacks in Brazil [sic]. It is difficult, if not impossible, to assess this highly racialized statement as it relates to Syria and Lebanese people's knowledge of race and race relations, especially between whites and blacks in Brazil. There is no doubt that the Syrian-Lebanese, both in the Levant and in the Americas, knew of the existence of Black communities across the hemisphere. Yet Lamia's recollections seem more likely to have been informed by her experiences living in Brazil than her experiences back in Lebanon. In other words, in societies where religious affiliations frequently supersede any other individual or group collective identity, anxieties about race and color appear to be farfetched.

Soon, it became obvious to her family and friends that Lamia's husband lacked any interest in improving his family's economic situation. On one occasion, as the couple argued with each other, Lamia sought the help of a soldier who happened to be present at her father's gas station. She quickly showed the soldier a revolver, which, according to Lamia, belonged to her husband. She accused her husband of wanting to kill her father with it. After much paperwork and the intervention of an attorney, Lamia's husband, after spending some time in prison, was deported back to Lebanon.

With her husband's deportation, Lamia became her family's sole provider. She found a factory job in the Tatuapé district of São Paulo. When the factory owner, also Lebanese, asked her if she had any experience, she replied that she had never been inside a factory. The factory owner gave her a job cleaning the fabric pieces that came out of the looms before they were sent off to be painted. Once she secured that job, she rented a small house and brought her children to live with her. After ten years in the factory, Lamia decided to start her own business. She began to look for a practical space where she and her family could live and where she could also start her own business – a common practice among Syrian-Lebanese business owners (Truzzi, 2005). It wasn't long before she struck a deal with an Italian man who rented out to her just the type of building she was looking for. She began selling scraps of material in her store. Advised by her brother-in-law, who had a significant amount of business experience, Lamia began to sell larger pieces of fabric. For Lamia, the relative success of her business and to some extent her own life had nothing to do with her countrymen or her extended family; rather, it had everything to do with the choices

she made along the way. At the early stages of her business, she bought most of her merchandise from the merchants on 25 de Março Street, but as her business grew, she negotiated directly with factories. This was a slow moving process, but she managed to make it all on her own.

### Conclusion

For many decades now, Syrian-Lebanese of all generations continue to point to the peddler as a symbol representing their humble origins and successful economic mobility. Over the years, the peddler embodied white male characteristics, analogous to the Brazilian *bandeirante*, and excluded the contributions of Syrian-Lebanese women. While single, married, and widowed individuals arrived in São Paulo under different socio-economic circumstances, their perceived “whiteness” allowed them access to niches of the emerging capitalist market from which non-whites were excluded. Working-class Syrian-Lebanese women worked outside the home as factory workers, peddlers, or as business owners. Their economic contribution to their families and community changed very little as a result of the migration experience. In general terms, Syrian-Lebanese women were as adventurous and pioneering as their male compatriots during the early years of settlement in Brazil.

While some scholars have argued that in Brazil the process of race classification is imprecise due in part to the positive correlation between race and class (Truzzi, 1997), others have considered the Syrian-Lebanese migrants to be neither black nor white. In the early years of migration to Brazil, the Syrian-Lebanese were classified as white by the state in the positivistic sense. Yet race, ethnicity, and color as relationships of power cannot be understood simply in this sense. Access to jobs, business opportunities, and housing, among other aspects of everyday life in the emerging metropolis, were informed by the structured division of labor in São Paulo and based on gender, class, and color hierarchies (Chalhoub, 1986). In this regard, Syrian-Lebanese, both men and women, benefited from their color classification. For women such as Lamia Diab, color, gender, and class functioned as pivoted-axels, constantly repositioning their location woman/white/immigrant/etc., as the women challenged conventional white patriarchal social norms, both in public and in private life. Examining the intersection between gender, race, and class as compatible categories of analysis compels us to rethink the dominant narrative of Syrian-Lebanese emigration to Brazil – from the chain migration thesis, the exceptional social mobility myth, to uncharted territories of color privilege and exclusion.

José D. Najar, Ph.D. Candidate, History Department, Latino Studies Program, Indiana University, Bloomington, USA.  
Email: [jnajar@indiana.edu](mailto:jnajar@indiana.edu)



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