

■ *Jess Bier*

THE GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

How Niqula Nasrallah Became John Jacob Astor: Syrian Emigrants Aboard the *Titanic* and the Materiality of Language

In this article, I explore the physical afterlife of one victim of the 1912 Titanic disaster, the Syrian American businessman Niqula Nasrallah, whose remains would widely be identified as those of the famous multimillionaire John Jacob Astor. Syrian emigrants constituted 10–20 percent of the Titanic's third-class passengers, and their names were overwhelmingly altered as casualty lists were transmitted via an early form of radio. Such transformations only served to reinforce linguistic barriers, in direct contrast to widespread assertions that new technologies would enable instantaneous worldwide communication. A discussion of the substitution of Astor for Nasrallah thus allows insight into the production of confusion that resulted from the development of wireless technology as a linguistic medium. [migration, technology, materiality of language, globalization, Lebanon, Syria]

Definitional dissonance matters. The fact of not only diverse but downright opposite meanings signifies [. . .] Definitional excursions into the meaning of modern, modernity, and modernism begin and end in reading the specificities of these contradictions. [Friedman 2001]

We must first stop this leak in the ship, through which the muddy waters from without threaten to sink us. [Samuel F. B. Morse, inventor of Morse code and an outspoken believer in a Catholic conspiracy to undermine the federal government, commenting on U.S. naturalization law, 1855:143]

Of the more than 1,500 victims of the *Titanic* disaster in April 1912, only one, the Syrian emigrant Niqula Nasrallah, would come to be confused with the famous multimillionaire John Jacob Astor IV (Elias 2005; New York Times 1912b). Five days after the sinking, as rescuers pulled over 300 icy bodies from the sea, Nasrallah's remains were recovered, lion-and-sword tattoo on his right forearm, still wearing the white speckled shirt and blue serge suit that he had put on as the *Titanic* began to sink (White Star Line 1912b:43).¹

Despite the impending confusion, the recovery itself was not unusual—two or three sailors hauled Nasrallah by hand into one of the lifeboats from the rescue ship. Once on board, his remains were numbered, embalmed, and the items found on them were collected and cataloged. This article describes the journey his body took from that point forward. It was a body whose physical appearance, clothing, possessions, and other markers of identity would render it ultimately unrecognizable to recovery workers, who would attempt to fill the gap in comprehension with the use of familiar-sounding names—including that of Astor.

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The lack of consistency, and the inability to embrace inconsistency, were due in part to the use of wireless telegraph technology—an early form of radio—to relay the names of recovered casualties. As such, any discussion of the substitution of names begs an exploration of the ways in which the use of wireless affected, and was affected by, language's material forms. In the process of conducting such an exploration, I call upon varied conceptions of space, as experienced through migration, and time, in the form of capitalism's imperial lineage, in order to consider the role that changing communication technologies played in the diverse economic and cultural transformations of the era. In so doing, I draw affinities between specific instances of omission and extensive, but varied, systems of power related to race, class, gender, and ancestry in order to examine the ways that identity is used to literally make sense of others, and oneself.

Among those aboard the *Titanic*, Nasrallah was not alone in having a name of Arabic origin. Syrians constituted 10–20 percent of the steerage, or third-class, passengers who traveled on the *Titanic's* maiden voyage that departed from Southampton April 10, 1912, bound for New York with a stop each in France and Ireland.² The term *Syrians* in this historical context includes people from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, which encompassed nearly all of contemporary Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Jordan. Its diverse populations immigrated to the Americas in significant numbers in the early 20th century.³ Yet Syrians—that is, Ottoman Syrians—are rarely, if ever, mentioned in histories of migration to the Americas and are noted even less in the vast literature that deals with the sinking of the *Titanic*. The latter results, in part, from the fact that Syrian names are recorded in the archival record in jumbled form; the substitution of Nasrallah for Astor was only one instance of a vast series of name transformations, via the wireless telegraph, which disproportionately affected Syrian emigrants.⁴

In the early 1900s Syrian emigrants faced popular ignorance in the West, where they were often considered Turkish or Greek. Their own more common self-identification as Syrians, or by town or religious denomination, largely went unnoticed in mainstream accounts (Samhan 1999). The Syrian *Titanic* passengers, for their part, reacted to these inconsistencies in a variety of ways. As a result, their histories are important to anyone interested in deconstructing the discursive barricades that, whether between East and West, underdeveloped and developed, religious and secular, contribute to the polarization of experience at the intimate levels of everyday life. In particular, they speak to the ways that perceptions of a gulf between the Americas and the Middle East actually reinforce unproductive linguistic, cultural, and material differences between the two, thereby constructing them as separate and distinct regions or civilizations, although the links that join them include vast networks of personal relationships forged across generations. As this article shows, after the *Titanic's* sinking, the use of expanding technologies actually reinforced linguistic barriers in ways that ran directly contrary to goals of improved communication. This did not result, however, from any necessary or inherent facet of the technologies themselves. Instead, it derived from the particular geographically and historically specific biases inherent in the development and use of the wireless telegraph as a medium for language. These biases, including the prioritization of speed and neglect of language's materiality, only served to reinforce broader forms of racial, economic, gendered, and cultural discrimination in ways that had unexpected results. As such, they are symptomatic of broad processes of marginalization that far exceed, but are hardly unrelated to, Nasrallah's name.

In what follows, I begin by introducing the history of telegraphy, both wired and wireless, in order to demonstrate some of the connections between new forms of communication and related historical/geographical transformations; this is partly an effort to avoid objectifying technology, a charged term that was then only beginning to be used in its contemporary sense (Marx 1997). I next turn to a discussion of different theories of time and space in relation to Syrian emigration to the Americas. My aim is to problematize accounts of global-scale change that assume that

technological developments led directly and exclusively to speedier and more efficient forms of communication. I then return to the substitution of *Nasrallah* for *Astor* in order to more closely examine the ways that linguistic materialities both mediated and were mediated by emerging communication technologies, defined broadly. In the conclusion, I look briefly at the uneven racialization of Syrians in the Americas in the years since the sinking. My overall goal is to better understand the material relationships between language, technology, and power.

I refrain from providing explicit definitions for terms such as *capitalism* and *modernism*; this article deals less with explicitly stated references to these words and more with a particular set of experiences from the archival record—and the differing capitalisms and modernisms they represent—as described by those who passed through what is widely regarded as a pivotal event in the history of capitalist and modernist societies.⁵ As such, this article is itself a form of definition—namely, an example of the many semi-logical, incongruent, and often contradictory ways that the two terms were implicitly defined and intertwined in a unique place and time.

The Wireless Telegraph: Speaking in Tones

When his remains were first discovered, Nasrallah's name was faithfully attributed due to the English-language business card he had carried with him. However, as news of his passing traveled through the air, confusion began to occur. According to the standard practice for identifiable *Titanic* victims, once Nasrallah's body was recovered, his name was first transcribed into Morse code and then transmitted to nearby ships and stations in Newfoundland, Canada. After being received at these intermediate stations, the names would next be relayed to the top of Wanamaker's department store in New York City. From there they could be sent around the world via land-based and undersea telegraph cable. As the names came in at each wireless relay point, they were immediately deciphered in order to both verify the contents and pass on the news to local sources, before being translated into code once more and sent ahead. This extended game of Telephone, whereby information was coded and recoded, resulted in the distortion of many of the *Titanic* victims' names. In Nasrallah's case, his name went from "N. Nasser" to "Nicolas E. Rasher" to "N. E. Coles Rasher" in the course of successive transmissions (Indianapolis Star 1912; New York Times 1912a; New York Times 1912b).

In order to understand how the transformation occurred, it is necessary to discuss the history and uses of the wireless telegraph, which was the medium, if not the cause of the confusion. Wireless technology barely predated the turn of the 20th century, and it would begin to be taken very seriously in the aftermath of the *Titanic*'s demise. Although Guglielmo Marconi is most often cited as the originator of wireless, it has now emerged that he did more to publicize and encourage its diffusion than he contributed to furthering the technology. Wireless actually appears to have been developed independently by several different inventors, and claims for primacy have been made in India, Russia, Italy, Germany, Britain, and the United States. The early inventors of wireless believed it was possible to accomplish what seemed to be an insane and magical feat in the minds of nonscientists of the late 19th century: communication across great distances by way of invisible electromagnetic waves that course through the air (Cheney 1981:212–222; Emerson 1997).

In contrast to the novel *wireless* telegraph, the traditional telegraph, whose stations were connected via physical cables, had been developed in the 1830s; the Ottoman sultan Abdülmecid, in the hope that it would encourage internal unity, was the first leader to offer a patent to Samuel Morse, its U.S. inventor (Bektas 2001).⁶ The traditional telegraph was one of the dominant forms of long-distance communication throughout the latter 19th century, but wireless had already become widespread in situations where the telegraph station itself was mobile, such as a ship. In contemporary times, the wireless telegraph survives as the radio, and the traditional telegraph has become the (traditional) telephone. But in 1912, neither variety of telegraph could

transmit anything more than beeps or tones of varying lengths. And indeed, in this period both types, wireless and traditional, used the same code, although they were otherwise two very different technologies.

The shedding of the wires did more than open up one category of communication technology to its mobile possibilities, however. In the short term, wireless brought about important changes in the form of telegraph communication. Whereas the cables that connected land-based telegraphs were direct links, station to station, that formed a web or network of different stations, a wireless telegraph signal could be picked up by any wireless station within range. Thus, while traditional telegraphy had identifiable senders and orderly queues, wireless could easily degenerate into a cacophony of competing signals. Much has been made of the fact that the last ice warning received by the *Titanic* was dismissed by Jack Phillips, the *Titanic's* head wireless operator. Phillips became annoyed when the operator who delivered the warning cut in loudly, disturbing him while he was sending an overload of passenger messages to shore—his primary duty on board. He replied, “Keep out!” (HCPP 1912) or “Shut up!” (Butler 2002:66).

So, unlike telegraph employees in traditional stations, wireless operators were often listening to a host of noises. Such types of clamor were referred to as “mob rule” in a typical article of the period, whose author asserts that “with the cheapest [amateur wireless] apparatus unrestrained trivial messages create [the tower of] Babel” (New York Herald 1912).⁷ Yet, instead of attempting to reconceptualize the goals of communication in light of multiple voices and languages, the author, like many at the time, argues for strict regulation that would permit one dominant government system to prevail (New York Herald 1912). This search for a single, identifiable voice for wireless also contributed to the substitution of *Nasrallah* and *Astor* as there was no means by which operators could indicate an incomplete message or an uncertain character. As such, a direct connection existed between the refusal to contend with multivocality and the inability to reliably transmit names.

Language in Space and Time

The need for certainty did not couple well with the rapid innovations then taking place in many parts of the globe. Yet the contradictions this created were more than the by-products of an emerging technology. Instead, they reflect a linguistic worldview that has echoes in contemporary debates. The statement of Nikola Tesla, possibly the first developer of wireless, is still implicit in much mainstream globalization discourse even if different terms are now used: “I have no doubt that [worldwide wireless telegraphy] will prove very efficient in enlightening the masses, particularly in still uncivilized countries . . . and that it will add materially to general safety, comfort, and convenience, and maintenance of peaceful relations” (quoted in Cheney 1981:215). Despite the continued prevalence of this and similar attitudes, many scholars have put forth textured theories concerning the spread of communication technologies in the early 20th century and their impact on the use of language. With the substitution of *Astor* for *Nasrallah* in mind, I now turn to conceptions of space and time in order to examine the ways that they shed light upon the broader emergence of new technologies during this period. This includes the role that new technologies in general, and wireless technology in particular, played in fostering supposedly universal and instantaneous communication. I then look at these theories in light of Syrian migration to the Americas in the early 20th century, before returning to the *Titanic*.

David Harvey has famously noted the compression of space and time under capitalism (1990). The drive for ever larger profit pushes the economic machine to run faster, producing more goods in less time, causing both goods and people to travel greater distances more often and with increasing speed, a speed that reverberates across all areas of life. In line with Harvey’s argument, Stephen Kern has demonstrated the ways that industrialization resulted in new notions of time-space, and of speed in particular, for Europeans prior to World War I (2003). For Kern, the increas-

ingly frantic pace and dominating spread of capitalism reconfigured daily life down to its very essence. Such intimate changes are revealed in modern artists' revolutionary, if erratic, representations of space, including the space of the canvas, and time, including the stream-of-consciousness time of the novel as a literary form. However, while Kern follows Harvey in confining his discussion to Europe, unlike Harvey, he notes the ambiguity of time-spaces that may appear to be both shrinking and expanding, even for the people who benefited most from the developments (Kern 2003).

Though textured and illuminating, Kern's work is nonetheless marked by the absence of those who are left out of his analysis. Kern cites the *Titanic's* sinking in particular; he notes the successes of the wireless telegraph in allowing the general public in Europe and the United States to remotely and simultaneously witness an event the details of which, without wireless, would largely have been lost to recorded history, as rescue ships would have been unable to find either the survivors or the wreck (Kern 2003:65–67). Yet the study of the simultaneity induced by wireless is not complete without looking at the mishaps which were also engendered by the use of this same technology. For the *Titanic*, the wireless telegraph did permit enhanced forms of communication. Technology therefore contributed to a very different sort of rescue and recovery than had previously been possible. Nevertheless, as noted, those same developments also enabled new forms of mystification. In the event of a catastrophe, miscommunications which otherwise might simply have been annoying became cause for significant distress.

Thus, Harvey's time-space compression, and Kern's notion of ambiguously reconfigured notions of time and space among privileged Europeans, are only part of the picture, as time-space compression is an inevitable advantage of the rich. As a response to Harvey's theory, Cindi Katz has described the phenomena of time-space *expansion*, a corresponding effect upon the lives of members of subaltern groups who must travel ever greater distances and experience increasing interruptions simply in order to maintain "a semblance of the patterns and practices of production that long had sustained them" (Katz 2001:1224). So, while capitalism is not necessarily the original or sole inspiration of migration, the spread of globalized capitalism has helped to polarize both migration (Sassen 1991) and experiences of time and space. Consequently, if not for the incidental fact that Nasrallah's name was momentarily turned into Astor's, its misconstrual might have eternally delayed his hero's funeral in Queens, New York, where he was laid to rest in a coffin "wrapped in white silk and strewn with flowers" (Elias 2005:80). Nasrallah's remains had been met by his cousin Sab from Brooklyn—whose family had also taken in Nasrallah's wife—after they were transferred by train from Halifax, Nova Scotia, where the local ice rink had been set up as a temporary morgue (Ruffman 2000). Notably, the name appears as *Nassrallah* on the base of the family headstone in Queens (Figure 1), although it is spelled *Nasrallah*, with a single *s* as used in this article, in three separate places elsewhere on the same monument.

Yet Cindi Katz is not alone in noting the ways that productions of time and space speak to international economic and social divisions. If Harvey views capitalist time and space to be speeding up and compressing, Johannes Fabian calls attention to the ways that postcolonial territories are often depicted in Western discourse as being timeless, without history, or fixed in time. Such a portrayal is patronizing in its failure to notice changes in culture and economy, including transformations of the kind that Katz views as expansion (Fabian 2002). An analogous argument could be made for the spatialized depictions of postcolonial territories, which often project these anti-histories onto nations that were only forged during the course of the 20th century.

Such imperialist ideas also have transnational histories. Joseph Massad has analyzed the work of Arab intellectuals who themselves see the Arab World as a region whose inhabitants refuse to change in accordance with capitalist and liberal ideals. For example, the contemporary Moroccan philosopher Muhammad 'Abid Al-Jabiri refers to Arab thought and culture as existing in "dead time". Likewise, the Syrian Marxist Yasin al-Hafiz who (as did George Antonius in *The Arab Awakening*) divides



Figure 1

The Nasrallah Family Monument in Queens, New York, 2008. Niqula Nasrallah is buried here according to cemetery records, but his individual grave is unmarked. (Photo by the author.)

the Arab World into time zones, marking certain regions as being more or less frozen in time, as progressing through history—in this case, a deterministic, teleological form of history—with greater or lesser speed (Massad 2007:23–27). Although very little is known about Nasrallah’s views on these and similar matters, many Syrian emigrants of the early 20th century, for their part, adopted similar modernist ideas; they worked diligently in constrained conditions to prove their ability to conform to the economic and political ideologies of their destination countries and regions.

In the United States, such a process of conforming could not be separated from the notion of white supremacy. Indeed, as Sarah Gualtieri has pointed out, in order to obtain U.S. citizenship in the early 1900s, Syrian emigrants needed to prove their legal whiteness in a court of law—thereby began a series of court cases during which Syrians were determined alternately to either be white or Asian. Eventually, all people from the Middle East were defined as racially white for the purposes of the U.S. census, a categorization that remains in place (Gualtieri 2001; on whiteness and Irish immigrants to the United States, see Ignatiev 1996). The next section will demonstrate that Syrian emigrants at the time, and Syrian American intellectuals in particular, were by no means unaware of the connections between race, ancestry, class, and modernity. Nor did they discount the links between these categories and formulations of time, including alleged “backwardness,” and space, including conceptions of cultural “distance.”

Thus, the *Titanic* ocean liner can be thought of as a microcosm that bound together groups of individuals whose worlds were expanding, but not always for the better, with those whose worlds were shrinking, but not always for the worse. This is not the same as considering the ship an intermediate point between nations, however. Instead, given that the Atlantic is an analytical space in its own right (Gilroy 1993), the transatlantic steamships formed “cultures of circulation” (Lee and LiPuma 2002) all their own. Likewise, to the extent that emigrants participate in multiple cultures of

circulation, a more thorough conception of Nasrallah's presence aboard the *Titanic* can be obtained by bringing together the two countries where he lived, in addition to the transatlantic crossing (for related studies of migrant transatlantic cultures, see Civantos 2006 and Laliotou 2004). Two examples, one from greater Syria and one from New York City, will demonstrate the ways that upheavals in conceptions of space and time were constructed in the course of everyday life through the process of circulation and the introduction of new technologies. As we will see, Syrian emigrants also drew contrasts between their own expanding lives and the compression of capitalism both in New York City and in greater Syria.

Modernized Labor in Ottoman Syria

Many of the migrants' first experiences of speed and strict time-keeping under capitalism would not have taken place in New York City. Akram Khater has noted the effects of the transition to industrial time in greater Ottoman Syria (2001). His account of the struggles of French industrialists to regiment first male, then female peasant labor in Lebanon in the mid- to late-1800s echoes the work of E.P. Thompson, who notes the ingenuity of European laborers' resistance to quantified, demarcated, and standardized capitalist time (1967). Khater contrasts the time of the capitalist, which was "dictated by a clock linked to the exigencies of European markets" (Khater 2001:31) to that of the peasant, which

was never made up of concrete and invariable blocks that could be measured and controlled in a linear progression from past to future [. . .] Instead, time was seen as cyclical [. . .] The organization of events in sequential order was not necessarily done according to which came first in time but according to the purpose behind the intended structure. [Khater 2001:31 n. 52]

Given that the region had a dynamic past, but one which had settled into a period of peace following the reforms which took place after the rebellion of 1860, such expressions of time can be seen not as customary relics or evidence of an unchanging past, but as an attempt to establish normalcy and continuity in the face of past dislocation. In the latter part of the 19th century, Khater also points to the work stoppages, absenteeism, and negotiations which marked the labor cycle when workers were unhappy with their conditions—practices which by the 1890s would lead to a developed labor organizing culture among the workers, a majority of them female, in Ottoman Syria's largely French-owned silk industry.

Yet the Syrian silk industry subsequently collapsed due to a combination of the opening of the Suez Canal and the spread of a disease that ravaged mulberry trees—the silk worms' primary diet—that traveled east after decimating silk production in much of Europe. This resulted in a situation in which the portion of Syria that makes up present-day Lebanon was no longer able to compete with Japan. As a result, many of these same factory workers, now familiar with capitalist temporality, moved to New York, Massachusetts and New Jersey to work in the silk factories that previous years' Syrian emigrants had established there. Due to the fickle character of industrialization and improvements in transportation, women now needed to cross an ocean in order to get to work.

In other ways, the shorter, more compact time-space of cash-crop silk production expanded the time-frame of daily life for the workers. Marriage was postponed in order to make money, for marriage was more difficult for a worker who smelled like silk-processing chemicals, who could not help to raise children during working hours, and who sat side by side with men in the factories (Khater 2001). This was true even for male emigrants, as in the case of Nasrallah who had returned to Syria after many years to get married before boarding the *Titanic* with his new wife, on their way back to the United States. Education was put off for future generations. The day was extended with electric lights. Inside the factories with rows of open kettles where silk pods were boiled, every season was part of an endless summer. This stood in stark

contrast to the seasonal climate of the Lebanese mountains. Lives were shortened due to the physical tax of hard labor, but by some accounts they seemed endless and monotonous. Thus, many Syrian emigrants experienced capitalist compression in Lebanon before they ever left, but this compression resulted in the expansion of their daily time-space realm, an expansion which would be both the cause and symptom of their ensuing emigration.

Syrian Americans in Industrial New York City

The idea that time seemed to move more quickly in New York than in greater Syria is evident in early Arab accounts of life in the United States. Michael Suleiman has noted that Middle Eastern intellectuals in New York before World War II responded to the city in various ways (2002). Some were dazzled by the skyscrapers and elevated trains, as were many visitors to the city at the time. Others were astonished at the city's rampant inequality, a situation that confounded all of their preconceived notions of the United States (Suleiman 2002).⁸ One impression, however, runs through all of the accounts, although the value judgment attached to it varies with the perspective of the narrator: speed. Such speed was crucial to a discussion of Nasrallah's fate, because motives of efficiency also contributed to the errors of the wireless operators who relayed names to shore. Speed on the whole is common in the discourse of travelogues of New York City, both in the past and in contemporary times.

One author, Khalil Sakakini, was astonished to find people eating standing up in tiny restaurants: "The American walks fast, talks fast and eats fast [. . . Americans] are so fast that they have restaurants called *Fast Food*" (Suleiman 2002:33). In a judgment which includes a seed of time-space compression, the Lebanese poet Mikhail Naimy links speed in America to the intimate relationship between people and machines, with money as the intermediary. "What can you expect, therefore, from a civilization which surrendered its hands, legs, brain, conscience, justice, and honor to money and money turned it over to the machine?" He compares life in New York City to a vortex, spiraling down in ever smaller spaces and ever faster times. To him, New York City was a place where

Five million people [. . .] are sentenced to live in dens inside dens inside dens [. . .] They are all sentenced to incessant motion, day and night. In return for every smile and every hour of happiness and joy they are able to garner, they are forced to pay dearly through their blood, tears, brains, and muscles, as well as their hearts, and well-being. [Suleiman 2002:36-7]

Thus, for Naimy, time is punishment for the workers of New York City, who must labor longer and more intensely than those elsewhere, paying with their bodies, in order to earn a limited, measured, length of rest. Ameen Rihani, another Syrian author in New York, compares the fast time of the wealthy to the drawn-out time of the laborers, decrying, in Suleiman's estimation, "a 'civilization' in which millions of dollars are lost in a short time while miners worked 10 hours a day and risked their lives and the lives of their children for a mere dollar or two." Speaking of New York, Rihani concludes that, "a society which can only exist on the misery of a section of its people is cruel and unhealthy" (Suleiman 2002:40). This is the broader context, then, for the unlikely situation where an ordinary person—who had economic privileges of his own—would be taken for one of the world's richest and most famous individuals.

Nasrallah Becomes a Millionaire

With the little that is known about Nasrallah, it is difficult to tell if the metamorphosis of his name would have angered, disappointed, pleased, or amused him (Figure 2). However, it is at least possible to draw the general outlines of his past. Niqula Nasrallah was a person who built his own business from the ground up, who worked all of his life. As noted, when they had initially boarded the *Titanic* in Cherbourg, France, the 28-year-old Nasrallah and his 14-year-old wife Adele were recently

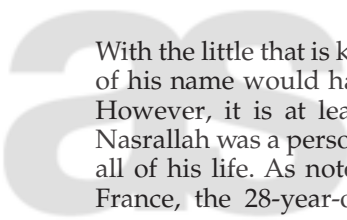




Figure 2
 Niqula Nasrallah in an undated photograph. (Courtesy of Emily and Philip Nasrallah, originally published in Karam 2000.)

married (Gowan and Söldner 2008); they, together with at least three other newly-wed Syrian couples, had planned to celebrate during the trip.⁹ Unlike the vast majority of the emigrants on board, however, the Nasrallahs were not in steerage, but in second class. This was evidence of the money Nasrallah had amassed as the owner of a confectionary business in Cleveland, the successor of one in San Francisco, where he had originally moved to join cousins who would soon become prominent in the movie industry, another new communication technology (Karam 2000:205–211). It was also due to the special occasion—like many who emigrated, Nasrallah had waited over a decade to return to his town of birth in order to marry (AFIHC 1901; see also Nasrallah 1997).¹⁰

In contrast, John Jacob Astor was the great grandson of the late fur trader of the same name. The younger Astor had helped to create the speed-loving lifestyle of the super rich. His family gave their name to Astoria, Queens, and John Jacob Astor IV was himself the originator of the Astoria portion of the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York. At the turn of the century, his family was the closest thing to royalty that existed in the United States. In a situation that was superficially similar to the Nasrallahs', Astor and his second wife Madeleine were themselves on their honeymoon aboard the *Titanic*. Unlike Niqula, however, Astor, then in his forties, had recently divorced his first wife in order to marry the 18-year-old Madeleine (New York Times 1912a). Taking advantage of time and distance as a means of forgetting, the newly married couple had decided to honeymoon abroad to avoid the gossip about their scandalous marriage. Notably, they spent time in Cairo before returning with first-class passage in an enormous 3-room cabin aboard the maiden voyage of the White Star Line's newest and reportedly unsinkable ship (Lord 1976; White Star Line 1912a).

Yet neither honeymoon would ever be complete. They would survive, but both Adele and Madeleine were widowed before they reached New York. Upon their arrival, they joined a host of others urgently waiting to receive word of the unrecovered victims. This crowd was well aware of the vagaries of the telegraph. It included a star-struck public and journalists who collectively speculated as to the whereabouts of the most famous passengers aboard. Which is why, when the White Star Line's New York office transmitted the name "Nicholas E. Rasher" among the list of bodies recovered, the officers immediately began to suspect that this was John Jacob Astor, and the possibility was publicized in newspapers around the world. Soon after the list was released, however, Adele, one of the 29 survivors out of the estimated 154 Syrians who had been on board, informed them that this was likely Nasrallah, her husband, the candy-maker from Cleveland, Ohio, and Zahle, in present-day Lebanon (New York Times 1912b; Orfalea 2006). Further details proved her suspicion to be correct (White Star Line 1912b:43).¹¹

Although it was retrieved the day after Nasrallah's, the discovery of Astor's body would not be publicly announced for an additional five days. The delay may have been due to privacy concerns, although it may also have resulted from the poor condition of Astor's remains. Apparently crushed by one of the ship's four tall funnels as it fell, he was identified by the embroidered initials "J. J. A." on his collar and the more than three thousand U.S. dollars' worth of currency in his pocket—equivalent to over 20,000 dollars today (Butler 2002:136; White Star Line 1912b:124). So, what consequences resulted from the mix-up of these two very different, yet in some ways similar, individuals?

Myopic Moderns and the Materiality of Language

When the *Titanic* sank, over 15 hundred lives and 7.5 million dollars were lost in a little over two hours; the recovery has never ended. Not surprisingly, the notion of speed, including the speed of communication, played an important part in the recovery effort. Yet, if wireless misunderstandings, coupled with more general disorder, resulted in crises of meaning during the recovery, then similar breakdowns in communication before and during the sinking also deepened the gravity of the disaster. Several of the misunderstandings were partly fortuitous, and for the most part they occurred immediately before or during the sinking. Famously, the ship the *Californian*, which was less than nineteen miles away, did not heed the *Titanic's* distress calls. In an event that reveals the uneven adoption of the technology—as there was a 24-hour watch on deck, but not at the wireless station—the *Californian's* wireless operator had hung up his earphones for the night only ten minutes before the *Titanic* collided with the fatal iceberg. Meanwhile, the *Carpathia*, the ship that would arrive first at the rescue site, rushed at top speed through floating ice fields to meet the *Titanic's* lifeboats, a journey of 58 miles that took four hours, during which time many *Titanic* passengers perished in the water.

Other gulfs in communication were years in the making. The almost unilateral celebratory nature of presinking publicity is the most widely recognized cause of these, as assurances of safety were so widely believed that many of those on board were unwilling to listen to any information regarding potential danger. An overwhelming confidence does seem to emanate from the early documents. Upon its completion in Belfast, the *Titanic* was dubbed the "new giantess" (New York Times 1912e), as it was then the largest free-floating vessel in the world (New York Times 1912f). As such, it overshadowed earlier liners such as the *Titanic's* recently completed sister ship, the *Olympic*, which one reporter called a "genuine sea monster" that "cannot fail to impress the observer" (New York Times 1911). In an instance representative of the way the ships were marketed to the broader public, the symmetry of these two ships' rivets was even noted to "catch the eye and give the impression of exceptional strength" (New York Times 1910). Depictions of the *Titanic* and the *Olympic* often included extended laundry lists of the weights and measurements particular to

each ship (e.g. New York Times 1912f). They incorporated detailed descriptions of the “intricate Moorish pattern” in the “luxurious” electric Turkish baths, as they were described on the *Olympic* (Shipbuilder 1911), as well as the first class gymnasium’s so-called electric camel, an exercise machine designed to simulate the movement of a camel’s back. Such depictions, complete with orientalised touches, were instrumental in constructing them as ornate and impenetrable modern fortresses.

Additionally, the monolingualism of the wireless operators also played an important role in deepening misunderstandings. The operators who provided the *Titanic*’s only means of outside communication had all graduated from an intensive technical training program, although they were from poor or working-class backgrounds. The program’s curriculum included a variety of codes as well as the study of telegraph design and operation down to its most intimate detail. Since wireless operators worked primarily at sea, the students had to be fluent not just with international codes, but they also needed to be able to repair their equipment, which was large enough to fill two small rooms, in difficult conditions and with few replacement parts (Beauchamp 2001).

But even though they were highly educated in relation to many in the United States and Europe at the time, and were familiar with multiple codes and technical discourses, the telegraph operators received little formal training in any language other than English and possibly Latin. Thus, although many names were misconstrued during the difficult rescue, it is unlikely that any of the telegraph operators would have been able to repeat Nasrallah’s name, even in the absence of technological glitches.¹² Moreover, unspoken restrictions based upon perceived race and ancestry almost certainly existed in training schools for the Marconi Company, which dominated passenger and merchant wireless in the North Atlantic and served as the direct employer of the two operators on board the *Titanic*. As a result few, if any, bilingual Arabic-English wireless operators were trained for work aboard British and U.S. transatlantic ships. However, such oversight was not inherent to wireless technology. Attempts had been made to adapt Morse code, which was employed ubiquitously on both the wireless and the traditional telegraph, for multilingual use. In fact, this had been an integral part of the code’s later, if not its initial, development.

Upon completing the first working telegraph in the United States, Samuel Morse and his partners Leonard Gale and Alfred Vail, decided to use a code to facilitate communication via the new technology. Morse initially conceived of a system where each word in the English language would correspond to a unique symbol, in this case a particular number of clicks or pulses. But he and Vail—there is some disagreement over who first came up with the idea—soon replaced that with a system where each letter in the English alphabet would have a unique series of short and long beeps, usually written as dots and dashes, respectively, that were separated by pauses of different lengths to indicate spaces between individual letters and words; Morse Code was the result (Beauchamp 2001:54–56).

Morse and Vail’s method was an effective solution for languages that used the Roman alphabet, and diacritical characters were soon introduced in order to support most Romance languages. The principle of the system could also be easily extended to other alphabetic writing systems. In 1856, local operators in Erdine devised a code to support Turkish, then written using Arabic script, for use in the Ottoman Empire (Bektas 2000:687–8). Morse code had not been the only method of relaying messages via telegraph, however. In Britain, Charles Wheatstone, among other independent developers of the telegraph there, devised a machine that had letters printed on it around a circle, and a pointer that would turn as a message came in, indicating each letter as it was transmitted (Beauchamp 2001:26). Wheatstone machines had also been in use in the Ottoman Empire, with Arabic and Roman characters printed together on the same machine, but, in the interest of speed, this mechanism was almost immediately abandoned in favor of the modified Morse system (Bektas 2001:689).

Yet, while Morse code had been translated into numerous alphabets, English and French were two primary languages used to send telegraph messages; evidence

suggests that in the Ottoman Empire at least, foreign specialists called in to work the telegraphs, in concert with broader colonial attitudes at the time, looked down upon attempts to internationalize the system beyond European languages and writing systems. As noted, the Ottoman sultan Abdülmecid had been the first head of state in the world to support the telegraph in its infancy, yet when telegraphs were introduced there, it was with the assistance of British experts and machines developed abroad (Beauchamp 2001). This was in keeping with the development of the wireless and traditional telegraph in other areas of the world, where the laying of telegraph cables was usually accomplished along railroad tracks, which themselves had often been laid during colonial expeditions to explore and secure territory and people. Likewise, the introduction of early radio was seen as a means of reinforcing ties between colonists and their originary homelands, thereby bringing colonists “closer” to the centers of continental power (Mrázek 2002).¹³

However, Ottoman telegraphers were represented at the 1865 conference of the International Telegraph Union (Yurdal 2007), where an updated version of the original code was recommended for member countries (Huurdeman 2003). The new version was called *Continental code* in contrast to Morse and Vail’s original system, which was referred to as *American Morse* because operators continued to use it within U.S. borders. As the wireless telegraph was adopted aboard transatlantic ships, operators, who regularly communicated with ships originating in many different countries, almost universally accepted the Continental code. But many of the *Titanic’s* messages, once they reached shore, would still be sent overland by traditional, meaning wired, telegraph methods, and thus would be translated into American Morse, providing yet another layer to this supposedly direct form of communication. The development of a unitary code helped to eliminate some difficulties by decreasing the need to translate between different codes, while enabling others, as Continental code was explicitly suited to the Roman alphabet.

Continental code was a simplified type of American Morse that allowed for increased speed in keeping with capitalist time. Yet it also appears to have played a partial role in the confusion of *Nasrallah* and *Astor*. Based upon documents that were with him at the time, Nasrallah’s name may have been transmitted from the rescue ship as *Nasser*, and the version of his last name that first reached the White Star Line offices was *Rasher*. This suggests that somewhere the letter *N* was transmitted as an *R*, and an *S* as an *H*. Such transformations would easily have occurred due to the fact that, in Continental code the letter *S*, for example, is represented with three short beeps or dots, while the letter *H* is represented with four. The letters *N* and *R* are likewise similar in Continental Code. To add to the confusion, in American Morse the letter *R* is transmitted with three dots which are distinguished from those of the letter *S* only by the varying length of the gaps or silences in between (Huurdeman 2003:144).¹⁴

The prioritization of modernist technical knowledge among wireless operators contrasts with the types of linguistic expertise held by many emigrants. Unlike the telegraph operators, Syrian emigrants to the Americas may not have been conversant in Morse code—though many of them had other forms of technological knowledge. However, they would have had some familiarity with English even before they emigrated due to the prevalence of colonial institutions in Ottoman Syria—and American missionary schools in particular. And many of the returning emigrants spoke English. Yet fluency in Arabic or English would not have been required in order to ameliorate these concerns. In Arabic in particular, both *Nasrallah* and *Nasser* are relatively common names that only require a passing experience with the language—an experience that could have been obtained if the operators had been less circumscribed, and if those picked had been given more of a chance of interacting with the passengers instead of being overworked in the name of efficiency. In contrast to the way budgeting was handled during the ship’s construction, labor expenses were strictly minimized.¹⁵ Thus, when the system of regulated interactions between passengers and crew broke down during the sinking, there were few alternate experiences of communication to draw on in its place.

In addition to a lack of segregation or a more humane system of labor, however, a successful communicatory regime would also have required passengers to work through the barriers of separation, including those of space and time, which pervaded even the furtive interactions that were permitted. Such a feat requires a personal openness to hearing the unintelligible as well as an acknowledgement of life's unpredictability. It necessitates, in the words of the political theorist Patchen Markell, recognition of one's own finitude, including the inability to readily comprehend what is new or different—even if only as a prelude to ameliorating one's lack of awareness (2003). Thus, while knowledge of Arabic names was important and relatively easily acquired, the most significant factor was a willingness to deal with the unfamiliar, rather than any specific linguistic ability.

Thus, the wireless telegraph provided a way for the English speakers aboard the *Titanic* to correspond with other English speakers across great distances, but in effect kept them from communicating with many of their fellow passengers—something that wasn't deemed a worthy goal until the ship began to sink. Such disjoint interdependency was the outcome not of natural inhibitions, but of material restrictions created as a result of the specific goals used to direct resources and human effort. The substitution of a molded and often-mutated name like Niqula Nasrallah's for a venerated and obsessed-over name like that of John Jacob Astor was only made possible as a result of a situation where Nasrallah and Astor, two individuals who traveled aboard the same ocean liner but who normally would have never stood on the same deck, would die together nonetheless.

On the night of the *Titanic* disaster, Nasrallah was reported by at least one account to have saved the lives of dozens of children by tossing them into lifeboats to assist the ship's overworked crew (Moses 2000). In contrast, all evidence points to the fact that, like many aboard at the time, Astor did not believe he was in any danger for a good part of the night. When the moment came, Astor attempted to enter a lifeboat with his wife, despite the port side crew's reported adherence to the dictum of "women and children first." When Second Officer Charles Lightoller asked Astor to leave the boat, thereby sealing his fate, Astor calmly stepped back, said goodbye to his wife, and lit a cigarette, ignoring the rescue efforts that swirled around him (Butler 2002:223). These actions have alternately been interpreted as bravery and cowardice.¹⁶

Nasrallah's name would not be mentioned in the press in any form until the confusion with Astor began. However, before his remains had even been recovered, the *New York Times* held up Astor as a model for leaving the lifeboat calmly. This was against the damaging reports of a group of U.S. senators who were said to have rushed the boats when refused entry—chaos which is often reported to be the work of steerage passengers—purportedly causing the ship's sailors to fire their guns on the crowd (New York Times 1912c). In a way that only reinforced the rescue crew's unintentional bias, the media and the broader public focused their attention primarily on those passengers who were officially wealthy and officially white. Thus, the accidental forgetting and misunderstandings on the part of the wireless operators who transformed Nasrallah into Astor were supplemented by more intentional erasures on the part of New York's English-language media. This reinstitutionalization of power systems after the disaster was an attempt to force the world to make sense again, to create heroes from the most famous of the untimely victims, in the wake of a situation that frustrated just these types of narratives. In the name of rational progress, it was the only expedient thing to do.

This many-layered construction of events had a profound effect on the families of Syrian *Titanic* victims. As Leila Elias has discovered, the general lack of openness to unfamiliar names was compounded by the fact that the New York Arabic press, extensive by 1912, was left to transcribe back into Arabic those names from the official lists which they presumed to be of Arabic origin (2005). The publication of names in Arabic script was necessary given the multiple ways of representing Arabic names in Roman characters. Even those Arab Americans who were fully literate in English might not recognize a name if it were not relayed in Arabic script.

The process of retranscription severely deepened the confusion. Some names disappeared from the lists only to later reappear as editors struggled to decipher the wireless operators' earlier distortions. At least one Austro-Hungarian casualty Franz Karun was listed in the Arabic press under the Syrianized names *Firnaz Karram* and *Fransis Karam*. *Bannurah Ayyub Dahir* appeared in *The New York Times* as "Banoura and Bancoura Ayont"; the female name *Adal Najib Qiyamah* became the male *Najib Hachine* (Elias 2005). This was because the Syrians' names were almost untraceable when first released in the broader press. One Syrian family member in New York stormed into the office of the White Star Lines, despondent at hearing that only 7 of his 18 relatives on board could be identified by the lists of names of survivors or casualties as released by the company (Elias 2005). Many names were mixed up in the aftermath of the sinking, yet even in the absence of reliable statistics due to ongoing confusion, a simple glance at the various lists demonstrates that Arabic names were altered more often and much more drastically than those of the other passengers. The discrepancies were also exaggerated by the expansive temporalities of migration. Emigrants were accustomed to waiting one month or more at port in order to obtain passage. The regular delays, coupled with a similar issue of improper naming on the ship's initial passenger roster, meant that many of those searching for survivors were unsure if those they were looking for had even been aboard the ship. The agony of waiting, the misplaced and aborted grief which resulted from the slippage of names, the lack of any consistency in translation or transliteration caused extended delays.¹⁷

The disconnection dragged on for eight days. At that point, many in the Arabic press stopped printing names due to the confusion that had been generated, although editors continued to assist individual families with inquiries. However, the numerous Syrian organizations that existed in the area were prevented from separately housing and administering to Syrian survivors. As a result, bilingual reporters had difficulty identifying survivors that were scattered in relief agencies throughout New York City (Elias 2005).

The *Titanic* is Still Sinking: Past Disasters and Present Catastrophe

Thus, the substitution of *Astor* for *Nasrallah* was symptomatic of much broader trends of marginalization whose consequences were felt long after the sinking (Elias 2005; regarding Armenian survivors see Peltekian 2007). In a wider context, the renamed and misidentified bodies of Syrians and Syrian Americans aboard the *Titanic* could be related to the miscounted, misnamed, and otherwise omitted casualties of other major disasters. Nor can they be separated from frustrated attempts to visually categorize others according to strict hierarchies of race and ancestry. In particular, the first recorded fatality to result from a xenophobic hate crime after 9/11 was neither Middle Eastern nor Muslim, but a Sikh businessman in Arizona named Balbir Singh Sodhi; Filipino and Mexican Americans were also targeted (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr N.d.).¹⁸ In this light, an exploration of Nasrallah's material afterlife provides an example of incommunicative legacies that are still in operation, albeit in very different forms. It thus provides for a fuller understanding of the ways in which processes of segregation and integration continue to result in the violent rejection of bodies that are rendered unintelligible, both physically and discursively. Yet it also points to the pitfalls of assuming that anyone should or could exhibit an identity that is always, completely, and uniquely nameable or recognizable.

Under ideological regimes like modernism, where the human is divorced from the nonhuman, agents severed from objects, and Self excised from Other, the process of identifying oneself and others plays an important role in determinations of those who count in social interactions (Keane 2007). In what Judith Butler terms *foreclosure*, dominant methods of depicting others often serve to set the terms of discourse, including the limits of what can or cannot be said (Butler 1997)—and, it could be added, *who* is allowed to speak or act, and *which* bodies are among the living, the wounded, or

the dead. However, the practical workings of such limiting processes often go unnoticed in scholarly work, in part because they may not be explicitly coordinated, although their overall effect is systematic, and in part because they often occur on the level of the everyday. Given that it took place incrementally, and that many of its stages were recorded in the archival record due to the fame of the *Titanic's* wreck, the identification of Nasrallah as Astor provides a unique opportunity to examine the ways that categorizations were employed in one exceptionally significant place and time. As such, this article presents a historic narrative of great contemporary importance. It is the story of an individual whose migration did not end with his death.

Conclusion: Assimilation as a Linguistic Strategy

For his part, Nasrallah's incorporation into the dominant global order may not have saved him the confusion which resulted from broader ignorance, compounded by an extremely pressing environment (see Gualtieri 2004; Orfalea 2006; Takaki 1993). Yet it did contribute to his body's chances of being identified at all, even if mistakenly so; the politics of naming helped to determine the outcome of the recovery. Of the 306 casualties found floating in the water by the recovery workers of one ship alone, at least 116—more than one-third—of the victims without identification, or those whose ID was illegible or in a script like Arabic that the sailors could not decipher, were simply buried at sea (White Star Lines 1912). As Giorgio Agamben has noted in the case of refugees, it was as if the unidentifiable casualties simply could no longer exist (2005). Unlike refugees, however, who are included in society by their very exclusion from it, and who thus may be consigned to perpetual nonexistence, many of the Syrian victims were either randomly renamed or simply thrown overboard, both functioning as a reincorporation into the dominant order, two forms of a single unwilling baptism after death. As such, the treatment of the Syrian *Titanic* casualties mirrors the ways that members of the Arab Diaspora (but not Arabs in general) were often greeted with willful blindness rather than open stigmatization in the years leading up to World War I (Gualtieri 2001). In order to stigmatize the Syrians of the pre-WWI period, those in power would have had to acknowledge the emigrants' existence. Doing so would be to allow for the possibility that the West and the Arab World were not necessarily as separate or distinct as they were held to be.

Yet the confusion which followed the sinking was not the first time that Nasrallah's name had undergone a change. Evidenced by his business card, in the United States he appears to have altered his name *Nasrallah* or *Nasser Allah*—which literally means “God's helper”—by shortening it to *Nasser*, dropping the *Allah* at least on a professional level (Figure 3).¹⁹ The excision may have also been performed for him by the agent who originally admitted him to the United States at Ellis Island. Either way, in 1912 his name was transformed yet again, thanks to the wireless operators who transmitted the news of his death at sea.



Figure 3

The business card that Niqula Nasrallah carried with him aboard the *Titanic*. (Courtesy of Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.)

The trouble with naming was more than a passing concern. If the case of mistaken identity between Nasrallah and Astor is reminiscent of time-space expansion, the fact that Nasrallah had previously altered his professional name to *Nasser* can be seen as an attempt to compress his name. If voluntary, this compression may have represented a pragmatic attempt to save the time of repeating, spelling, and explaining his name, as well as a reflection of changes in his identity. It was likely also a reaction to the widely acknowledged reality that, at that time as much as in the contemporary world, those without the expected racial and religious conformities, often detected in a name, were systematically excluded from many types of employment (Orfalea 2006). To some extent, then, the Nasrallahs' presence in second class instead of steerage was predicated on their ability to become the *Nassers*. In Niqula Nasrallah's case, the temporary substitution of a millionaire's name for his own was a more abrupt form of the passing of generations, the purposeful forgetting which often takes place among immigrants attempting to survive in a xenophobic atmosphere, to the point that each generation may not recognize the next. Astor himself was the great grandson of a German immigrant, the man who helped to found the family fortune. It is impossible to know what Nasrallah's chosen name would have been in an ideal world, or what it would have been had he survived. But his widow, until her remarriage, preferred *Adele Nasrallah*.

Adele would go on to marry another Syrian emigrant, Albert Shamaley, and raise four children before passing away in 1970 in El Paso, Texas (Gowan and Söldner 2008). Throughout her life, she refused to speak about her experiences during the sinking, or of the child that she bore a little over eight months later, although the infant died soon after birth. Poignantly, Madeleine Astor had sent a personal telegram to Adele, congratulating her on the delivery (New York Times 1912d). Like Madeleine Astor, Adele had been pregnant during the trip, but unlike Madeleine's child, hers would not survive.

The year 1912 had been a trying one for Adele, as she was forced to rely on distant relatives during the several months which it took for the authorities to release the 160 British pounds in gold pieces that her husband had sewn into his belt (White Star Lines 1912b:43). Far from home and unable to work consistently because she was pregnant, these funds kept her from extreme poverty. If Nasrallah's remains had been unidentifiable, it is unlikely that the money would have ever reached her. In that case, and in the absence of community support, Adele would have, to follow Foucault, not been murdered but neglected, not encouraged in life but simply left alone with few or none of the resources necessary to survive (Foucault 1990).

Due to the intimate link between assimilation and naming, it is testimony to the relentlessness of power on an everyday level that there exists a sort of continuity in the transformations of Nasrallah's name. It persisted even in the event of an opening such as the *Titanic* disaster and proceeded mistakenly even in death. This consistency demonstrates the extent to which power structured the choices of the journalists and wireless operators. Such continuity can only be broken down by those who refuse to continue to define others, and themselves, according to the simplified categories and experiences that have been imposed upon them, and that they impose upon each other (Foucault 1990). Likewise, any form of social or political advance may be frustrated if greater attention is not paid to the physicality of language and the ways language is used to disempower specific groups through efforts to redefine them and thus to fix them ideologically and physically in both place and time (Fabian 2002).

If internalized power, in the form of socialized interpersonal blindness, is one way that the time-space of the individual exceeds that of the body, in Nasrallah's case the reverse was also true. Primarily due to the confusion with Astor, the time-space of Nasrallah's body exceeded that of Nasrallah as a living human being. If Astor's body had not been found, or if Nasrallah were traveling alone, the mix-up may never have been revealed. The bodies of Niqula Nasrallah and John Jacob Astor IV were both altered drastically in the process of their untimely deaths. Thus, questions of whether or not these were indeed the remains of the newlywed millionaire from New York or

the newlywed candy-maker of Cleveland would ultimately have been immaterial. Despite the fact that they set out to assist all of the *Titanic's* survivors and victims, the wireless telegraph operators did not find Syrians, because they were hardly aware that Syrians existed. Regardless of whom they sought, the recovery workers, and by implication the broader Westernized public, found John Jacob Astor. From "Niqula Nasrallah" to "Nicola Nasser," from "Nicholas E. Rasher" to "N. E. Coles Rasher" to "John Jacob Astor," the transformation was complete.

Notes

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1. Regarding transliteration, all of the Arabic words used in this article are relatively common names whose spelling would be known to those who are literate in Arabic. In light of this, when representing Arabic-origin names I have not adopted a form of standard transliteration designed to help an Arabic-speaker to recognize the names' Arabic spelling. Instead, I have attempted to use the English spelling employed by the person in question, to the imperfect extent that it can be gleaned from official documents. This seemed the most fitting way to represent the names, given that those who appear in this article were all accustomed to rendering their names into English script and would likely have had a preferred, or at least a customary, method of doing so.

2. I calculated this statistic using the most conservative estimate of Arabic-origin names from among the ticketed passengers aboard the ship, in concert with available information on the place of birth of casualties and survivors (White Star Lines 1912a). My findings agree with other available source lists of Syrian passengers aboard the *Titanic*, notably Moses (2000), a source that, although questionable in many respects, nonetheless contains a set of extensive lists of Syrian passengers aboard, compiled in conjunction with the assistance of the staff of the Library of Congress. All available figures, whether by my own count or from other sources, confirm that Syrians formed no less than 10, and no more than 20, percent of the *Titanic's* steerage passengers. Also see note 11, below.

3. Throughout this article, I refer to the emigrants as *Syrians* because this was the term used at the time, due to the fact that they were coming from the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, which included most of contemporary Israel/Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. The majority of the emigrants to the Americas, like Adele and Niqula Nasrallah, would today be considered Lebanese and would not necessarily identify as Arabs, but at the time they would likely have called themselves *Syrians* or, alternately, *Awlaad al-Arab* (children of the Arabs) in a broader sense of the word *Arab* that does not necessarily correspond to nationalist definitions. For more information on the subject of Arab identities in differing geographic and historical contexts, see Haddad (2004).

4. One exception is the momentary appearance of a family of Syrian emigrants in the Hollywood film, *Titanic* (Cameron 1997). In the movie, a father scours an Arabic-English dictionary, searching for the word *berthing* which is printed on a sign in the ship's hallway, while his wife and two daughters urge him on, the wife by yelling "Yallah! Yallah!" [Come on! Let's go!] in Arabic. While an attempt to follow the historical record by including "Syrian" passengers, however fleetingly, the family's exoticized (and historically inaccurate) clothing only results in a depiction of them as a singular curiosity.

5. This article is less concerned with the avant-garde movement Modernism, which is relatively easy to define, than with Modernism as a diverse and broad-based set of ideals that were developed in relation to, but also separate from, elite cultural movements.

6. Abdülmecid hoped that improved communications would lead to greater centralization of power, although the actual laying of telegraph wires to Istanbul did not begin until later and then primarily employed British telegraph machines that had been developed at roughly the same time as the telegraph in the United States (Bektas 2001).

7. For a fascinating contemporary example of *party line* or nonexclusive technologies and their effect upon modes of communication, see Barker (2008).

8. For example, as Niqula Haddad noted in 1908, "the lack of fairness in the distribution of wealth in America is its worst calamity, and it is worse here than anywhere else in the world" (Suleiman 2002:35).

9. Adele's age was given as 18 years at the time, but according to the her death certificate from 1970, her age was 14 years in 1912, as noted by Göwan and Soldner (2008). It is difficult to say which figure is correct. However, at the time a 14-year-old bride would not have been unusual in many countries, including the United States.

10. According to available evidence, the only Arabic-speaking passenger in first class was Mr. Hammad Hassab, who was working as a tour guide for Mrs. and Mr. Harper. The latter was a director of the Harper & Brothers Publishing House, the publishers of both *Harper's Weekly*, now known as *Harper's Magazine*, as well as the fashion magazine, *Harper's Bazaar*. According to the lists of survivors, all three of them were rescued and arrived safely in New York. The company survives as HarperCollins Publishers.

11. Estimates of Syrian survivors range from 74 to 159, partly due to the fact that no complete list of steerage passengers exists. Generally, the number 159 refers to the number of third-class passengers who either listed their place of birth or residence as "Syria" or a town in Ottoman Syria, in addition to those who have common Arabic names (*Nasrallah* being just one example). The number 79 includes only those passengers, such as the Nasrallahs, who can be traced to present-day Lebanon—an area that, as noted, is much smaller than all of Ottoman Syria. I chose to use the number 159 after personally verifying the names on several published lists, including the full lists available on the Encyclopedia Titanica website as well as those found in select nonacademic sources such as Thomas and Thomas (2002) and Moses (2000). Also see note 2 in this article.

12. It is important to emphasize here, however, that any disjunctures were the result of forces that rendered the experiences of different groups both fundamentally *comparable* and *unequal* as a result of Syrian emigrants' incorporation into globalized power hierarchies through extensive forms of contact, rather than preexisting cultural incommensurability, or complete mutual unintelligibility, of the sort explored by Povinelli (2001). This is not at all a claim that Syrian emigrant culture at the time was completely commensurable with Western culture. Instead, it is only to assert that the names which were dealt with in this article—including those reported to customs agents and in correspondence, or provided when the transatlantic tickets were initially bought—represent emigrants' attempts to attain commensurability due to the very circumstances of the names' circulation and transmission.

13. Yet, in both the Ottoman Empire and Dutch Java, at least, the use of radio appears to have been central to the consolidation of nationalist movements, whose members would use radio's unifying power, largely in keeping with modernist goals, to opposite ends than those the imperialists had intended (Mrázek 2002:161–189; Bektas 2001:696).

14. To my knowledge, the individual telegrams have not survived.

15. For example, crewmembers' pay stopped the minute that the *Titanic* wreck slipped beneath the ocean surface, as mentioned in Butler (2002). Similarly, the bodies of *Titanic* passengers were given differing levels of treatment, including embalming and burial, depending upon the class of their ticket; crewmembers' bodies were not purposefully preserved in any way (Ruffman 2000).

16. Many different accounts exist regarding the Astors' experience with the lifeboats. This is the best-corroborated story, although it is interesting more as a means of analyzing the ways the event was reported and reinterpreted, rather than as a factual account of what Astor may have done during the sinking.

17. The inability to deal with the physical aspects of language is also evident among the recovery workers, who focused upon objects of economic value and apparently did not list the nonmonetary paper goods, like the business card, that were found among Nasrallah's effects. For them, it appears, the stuff of language—including passports, postcards, and identification forms, among others—were not objects to be counted as individual possessions.

18. It is widely accepted that the *Titanic's* sinking resulted in legislation requiring ships to carry enough lifeboats for every passenger and crew member on board, laws which are the predecessors of many current international shipping requirements. Yet the bulk of lifeboats generally go completely unused during a ship's lifetime. This has transformed the means of local transportation in regions such as Southern Bangladesh, where buyers have come to use the lifeboats of scrapped oil tankers and cruise liners for going about their daily lives along the coast. Lifeboats are readily available in regions where defunct ships are dismantled, the parts sold on a variety of markets as part of a ship-breaking industry that is incredibly dangerous for most workers—yet, as the journalist Roland Buerk describes, one that has created local millionaires many times over since it first began in the 1970s (2006). Thus, even in the absence of a disaster which results in people of previously segregated economic and social groups sitting side by side overnight, lifeboats continue to present a complex geography of class and ancestry.

19. Early after the confusion with Astor was discovered, the New York Arabic press misidentified Nasrallah as a prominent businessman from Cairo, Nicholas Nasser. Unlike the Nasrallah/Astor confusion where Nasrallah's name was altered because it was (initially) *different* from Astor's, this second temporary mix-up apparently occurred because the Egyptian businessman's name was *identical* to the shortened name that appeared on Nasrallah's business card (Elias 2005; Karam 2000).

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Graduate Center, The City University of New York
Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences
365 Fifth Ave., 4th Fl.
New York, NY 10016
jess_bier@yahoo.com