

**When the Queer East Met the  
American West: How the Same-Sex  
Relationship Between a Syrian  
“Princess” and Her “Secretary”  
Destabilized Orientalism in the Early  
Twentieth Century**

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**Introduction**

With their entire household suffering from starvation, Naomi and her husband abandoned their home in the Kingdom of Judah in search of food. Settling where they eventually found sustenance, Naomi and her family established their new home east of Judah, in the Kingdom of Moab. There, Naomi’s husband died, and her two sons married Moabite women. A decade later, Naomi’s two sons died as well. Now without her husband or children, Naomi felt the time had come for her to return to Judah. She instructed her now former daughters-in-law, Orpah, and Ruth, to depart for their respective homes too. Orpah did as Naomi instructed, but Ruth and Naomi had grown close. Ruth dismissed Naomi’s order and pledged to go wherever she went, stay wherever Naomi stayed, call Naomi’s people her people, and consider Naomi’s God her God. Her fidelity to Naomi even extended beyond the physical world. Ruth also promised to die wherever Naomi died and to be entombed with her for eternity.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the story of Ruth and Naomi first appearing in the Old Testament, their love greatly resonated with

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth 1:1-22.

modern lesbian communities. Helen Anderson incorporated the story of Ruth and Naomi into her 1937 play *Pity for Women* to counter dominant narratives of homosexuality as a sinful and criminal act. Because Anderson's main characters, Ann and Judith, live as an openly lesbian couple and pledge themselves to each other using the same words Ruth uses to pledge herself to Naomi, lesbian literary historian Linnea Stenson acclaims *Pity for Women* as the first lesbian work to show resistance from the author—and characters—toward the dominate prejudices against same-sex relationships. Moreover, Stenson argues *Pity for Women* is the first example of anyone using Ruth and Naomi's story as evidence of God's love for same-sex couples.<sup>2</sup> My research suggests this interpretation dates back further than *Pity for Women*, however. Anderson's adaptation of Ruth and Naomi's story is one example of a tradition dating back to at least 1919 when "Princess" Rahme Haidar met her "secretary" Lucille Burgess and they began a beautifully subversive journey together. Their story fills a glaring absence of same-sex desire in the history of early Arab American communities and shows how a Middle Eastern woman and her same-sex partner worked to destabilize Orientalism in the early twentieth century.

### **Rahme Haidar: The Missionary**

Born with an infectious personality to a well-off family who ensured her education was no less than remarkable, Rahme Haidar immigrated to the United States very well-equipped in 1899.<sup>3</sup> According to the 1910 United

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<sup>2</sup> Helen Anderson, *Pity for Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1937); Lori

L. Lake, "Lesbian Fiction Herstory: After The Well of Loneliness," last modified October 21, 2016, accessed May 3, 2022, <http://www.lorillake.com/AfterTheWell.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Rahme Haidar, *Under Syrian Stars* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1929), 25.

States Federal Census and her autobiography, *Under Syrian Stars*, Haidar left her home in Baalbek at the age of 13 and traveled through various European ports and cities until she arrived in the New York harbor with a group of female friends similar in age.<sup>4</sup> At the time, young women often emigrated from the Middle East in groups and relied on assistance from early Arab American communities. Early Arab Americans sought to tame the unbridled sexuality they believed all young women possessed. The community members who aided Haidar and her companions as they traveled in search of modest work, education, and husbands likely imposed these conservative expectations upon them.<sup>5</sup> But Haidar proved resistant to societal constraints. Her professional goals, sexual orientation, and overall visibility challenged these traditional expectations for her life.

Educated at Denison University in Ohio<sup>6</sup> and Chicago University in Illinois,<sup>7</sup> Haidar's collegiate training secured her a position as the superintendent of a Baptist mission in Los Angeles in 1909.<sup>8</sup> Living in the United

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<sup>4</sup> Haidar; *Under Syrian Stars*, 26; 1910 U.S. census, Los Angeles County, California, population schedule, Los Angeles City, precinct 76, sheet 75A, enumeration district (ED) 121, dwelling 87, family 95, Rahme Haidar; NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 1178.

<sup>5</sup> Akram Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon 1870-1920* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 64-70.

<sup>6</sup> *Denison University Annual Catalogue, 1904-1905* (Granville, OH, 1905), 125; *Denison University Annual Catalogue, 1906-1907* (Granville, OH, 1907), 129.

<sup>7</sup> "Students Hear Princess Rahmie Haidar," *The Trail: The Fortnightly of the College of Puget Sound*, January 8, 1918, 3. Accessed April 11, 2019,

[https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1139&context=thetrail\\_all](https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1139&context=thetrail_all); "Princess Haider, Syrian, Princess, Lincoln Visitor," *Lincoln Star*, July 28, 1918; "Princess Haider of Syria Is Visitor in Nashville," *The Tennessean*, November 28, 1920; "Princess of Syria is to Speak Twice in Miami Tomorrow," *Miami News*, February 12, 1921.

<sup>8</sup> 1910 U.S. Census, Los Angeles City, CA., pop. sch., ED 121, sheet

States for 11 years and 24 years of age at the time she accepted the role of superintendent, Haidar's age, marital status, education, and work defied expectations of modesty and gender. In early Arab American communities, women ought to be married. But many women, Haidar among them, never did. Unmarried women frequently lived with relatives, however. As the following pages show, Haidar's practice of living alone coupled with her exhaustive traveling challenged these traditional practices among early Arab Americans. In the words of a prominent member of the Middle Eastern diaspora in the United States at the time, Afifa Karam, Haidar's autonomy and positionality put her in what many likely saw as a "compromising moral position."<sup>9</sup>

Despite her successes and the occasional misogynist critic, Haidar never became complacent and always strove to expand her sphere of influence. While working at the mission, she attended classes at the University of Southern California (USC). While at USC, her professors exposed her to Shakespeare and drama and, like most acting coaches, they also encouraged her to "develop the inner self" and "prepare the body to express the inner self."<sup>10</sup> Through this education, Haidar mastered her skills in communication, performance, and engagement. Eventually, she earned a post-graduate degree in public speaking from USC, which proved very beneficial in her ability to teach classes, present at missionary conferences, and lecture at local social clubs. But Haidar's inner self eventually grew

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75A, dwell. 87, fam. 95, Rahme Haidar; *Annual of the Northern Baptist Convention* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 60; *A Record of the Work of the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society*, ed. Frances M. Schuyler (Chicago, IL, 1913), 169-70.

<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 31.

<sup>10</sup> *University of Southern California Bulletin: Year Book for 1908-1909* (Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California, 1909), 230.

dissatisfied with this small network and desired a wider audience.<sup>11</sup>

For a young woman living in the United States during the Progressive era, studying public speaking, and occasionally lecturing on the nature of her missionary work was about as respectable of a stage career as one could expect to achieve. The Progressives proved particularly ruthless in their condemnation of theater. They saw burlesques as too provocative, minstrelsies as too crude, and melodramas as too emotional. Often literally adjoined to known brothels, theaters themselves were contaminated spaces for Progressives. Blaming theater for corrupting natural-born citizens and poorly acculturating immigrants, the Progressives saw theater as a serious problem in need of a solution.<sup>12</sup>

Compared to their crusades to outlaw alcohol or regulate prostitution, the Progressives tried curbing the influence of theater with a unique strategy. They did not try to outlaw it or regulate it. They knew the popularity of theater would make it impossible to accomplish these goals. Instead, they created spaces and produced content they believed could serve as suitable alternatives to Vaudeville. At the local level, Progressives hosted house parties throughout the country that were essentially variety shows, like those in New York, Chicago, or Boston, but on a smaller scale and with a wholesome core.<sup>13</sup> More

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<sup>11</sup> *University of Southern California Bulletin: Year Book for 1908-1909* (Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California, 1909), 230-34, 377; "Princess Haider of Syria Is Visitor in Nashville," *The Tennessean*, November 28, 1920; "Princess Haider in Lecture on Syria," *Tampa Tribune*, March 24, 1921.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy J. Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Communication of Sex, 1790- 1920* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 109-11.

<sup>13</sup> "Old Circles," *The Chautauquan* 17, no. 2 (May 1893): 235; "Drawing Room Work," *Minutes of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of California* (San Francisco, CA: Brunt & Co., Printers, 1893), 136; "A 'Faggot Party'"

importantly for Haidar was the Chautauqua movement, the Progressive era's "wholesome" alternative to the mainstream theater. Promoting educators, bands, performers, and preachers of good moral character, Chautauqua assemblies brought family-friendly entertainment and culture to rural communities throughout the United States. While some women, such as Eva Tanguay, Gladys Bentley, Kitty Doner, and Kathleen Clifford, dared popular stages despite the judgments of Progressives, Haidar satisfied her desire to perform through the Chautauqua circuit.<sup>14</sup>

After six years of lecturing throughout Southern California as a missionary, Haidar began her career as a performer at the San Francisco World's Fair in 1915.<sup>15</sup> But the audience who attended her performance in San Francisco diverged greatly from her usual crowds. Before 1915, Haidar taught physical skills and the English language to recent immigrants or lectured other missionaries about her work.<sup>16</sup> But the spectators Haidar encountered in San Francisco were predominantly white, natural-born citizens of the United States who harbored deep misconceptions about, as one Texas newspaper put it,

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*The Library Journal: Official Organ of the American Library Association* 19, no. 4 (April 1894): 132; "With the Children," *The Christian Evangelist* 38, no. 49 (December 1901): 1563.

<sup>14</sup> "A Princess to Speak at Union Services Sunday," *Albany Daily Democrat*, August 14, 1915; "Naaman, the Leper Drama, Next Sunday," *Pine Bluff Daily Graphic*, June, 22, 1920; "Tent City is Built on Assembly Grounds," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, June 29, 1921.

<sup>15</sup> "A Real Princess Visits Bonham," *Bonham Daily*, March 8, 1918; "Princess Had Job Waiting 8 Years," *Bend Bulletin*, October 25, 1923; "Lecture Tour Contract Is Signed by Princess," *San Bernardino County Sun*, November 3, 1923.

<sup>16</sup> Rahme Haider, "Seed Sowing Among Syrians," *Missions: American Baptist International Magazine*, Volume 3, 1912, 564-65; "Appendix D: Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society" in *Annual of the Northern Baptist Convention* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1910), 124-25.

“[Haidar’s] native country—the Holy Land.”<sup>17</sup>

As the scholarship of Ussama Makdisi and Heather Sharkey shows, American Evangelicals greatly fetishized people and places associated with the Christian Bible in the early twentieth century. Before the 1915 World’s Fair, Haidar never imagined herself as a native of “the Holy Land.” In census data, immigration paperwork, and other documents related to Haidar’s travels, she reported connections with Turkish, Syrian, and Lebanese locals but never the Holy Land. These invocations of Christian scripture by American Evangelicals indicated to Haidar that most American Evangelicals possessed no real understanding of the Middle East. Furthermore, the convergence at the 1915 World’s Fair of a small sample of this much larger group showed Haidar that whole communities across the country stood ready for someone to educate and entertain them.

Although Haidar never credited one instance of ignorance as the inspiration for her career as a performer, she reported several times her shock at how little the people of the United States knew about, as they called it, the Holy Land or “the Orient.”<sup>18</sup> The crowd of the San Francisco World’s Fair in particular helped her realize “there was a great demand for enlightening the western world,” which she satisfied by traveling her world’s fair performance throughout the larger Chautauqua circuit.<sup>19</sup> This language of enlightenment challenged narratives of “The West” as “enlightening.” In a career founded on two transgressive

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<sup>17</sup> “A Real Princess Visits Bonham,” *Bonham Daily*, March 8, 1918. Other references connecting Haidar to the Holy Land are available at, “Princess Haider of Syria Is Visitor in Nashville,” *Tennessean*, November 28, 1920; “Princess of Syria Is to Speak Twice in Miami Tomorrow,” *Miami News*, February 12, 1921; “Tells of Beauties of the Holy Land,” *Pensacola News Journal*, May 1, 1922.

<sup>18</sup> Princess Rahme Haidar, *Under Syrian Stars* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1929), 9- 10.

<sup>19</sup> Haidar, *Under Syrian Stars*, 27.

performances, this is Haidar's first. As the following pages show, she goes on to subvert the dominant order of her day by reclaiming narratives of the Middle East from Orientalist tropes through her own "authentic" concoctions. For example, by shifting her audience from immigrants and other missionaries to American Evangelicals, Haidar altered her persona as well. Suddenly touting a royal lineage dating as far back as the book of Genesis, the "Real Live Princess" Rahme Haidar came into being only after the 1915 World's Fair.<sup>20</sup>

### **Rahme Haidar: The Princess**

For American Evangelicals, popular culture greatly influenced their expectations for Middle Eastern people like Rahme Haidar and, according to Linda Jacobs, the "first large-scale appearance of Middle Eastern entertainment" in the United States occurred at the Centennial International Exposition of 1876.<sup>21</sup> But troupes, such as Ali Ben Abdallah's, had been performed in tents, theaters, and churches for over a decade by the time of the Centennial Exposition. World's fairs gave Western audiences opportunities to consume performances and goods from "The East" on a much larger scale, however.<sup>22</sup>

Edward Said theorizes extensively on Orientalism, which he defines as the West's condescending image of the East as the fallen anti-thesis of the West. Defined through contrasts, the West is imagined as rational while the East is seen as violent, the West is democratic while the East is tyrannical, the West is peaceful while the East is barbaric, and so on. These portrayals proved critical in Western

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<sup>20</sup> "Real Live Princess Will Visit Pullman," *Pullman Herald*, November 11, 1916.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Jacobs, "Playing East: Arabs Perform in Nineteenth Century America," *Mashriq & Mahjar* 2, no. 2 (2014): 89.

<sup>22</sup> Jacobs, "Playing East," 80.

powers rationalizing their empirical conquests in the Middle East.

Performances by Middle Eastern troupes at world's fairs usually contributed to the spread of these stereotypes and sales of goods at world's fairs simultaneously linked the East with the new market economy of the West. Thus, as Said argues, world's fairs helped make Orientalism a circular cycle catering to the consumers of imperialism, who were also members of the societies that produced these demeaning images in the first place.<sup>23</sup>

Orientalist exhibitions, such as "Little Egypt" and "Streets of Cairo," entertained audiences at theaters, amusement parks, and world's fairs across the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>24</sup> These stereotypes also permeated the emerging world of film. In 1894, Thomas Edison produced a short clip of Hedji Cherif, an Arab acrobat. In the short, as Linda Jacobs notes, if not for his "exotic clothes, he could be any nineteenth-century acrobat."<sup>25</sup> This legacy of using stereotypical images, such as costumes, to define the East, continued with very popular films, such as *Kismet* (1920), *The Sheik* (1921), and *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), where Otis Skinner, Rudolph Valentino, and Douglas Fairbanks all received great acclaim for their portrayals of "Arabs."

While Fairbanks, Valentino, and Skinner portrayed men of the East as romantic, mysterious, and simultaneously barbaric figures, popular culture hypersexualized Middle Eastern women. As the concept of belly dancing became popular in the Western imagination, it transitioned from an indigenous Middle Eastern dance into an erotic performance. In most early Arab American communities, belly dancers wore mesh

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<sup>23</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Jacobs, "Playing East," 84.

<sup>25</sup> Jacobs, 81.

cloth when exposing their stomachs to maintain the expectation of modesty, but this element quickly dissipated from the attire of belly dancers in the United States and, as time moved on, performances became only more sexually suggestive through movement and other costume choices.<sup>26</sup>

While demeaning images of Middle Easterners filled the imaginations of white American audiences, the Ottoman Empire physically massacred Assyrian people and committed genocide. American Evangelicals felt compelled to aid Assyrians in this humanitarian crisis because they saw Assyrians as the descendants of Biblical figures and their faith compelled them to action.

They viewed Assyrians as the closest earthly descendants of Jesus Christ himself, which we will see that Haidar used in her ruse.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as Jesus says to his followers in the Gospel of Matthew, “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, coupling misconceptions about the millennia-old nature of Assyrian civilization with their faith in the Gospel as the key to salvation, American Evangelicals took great interest in Middle Eastern politics.

In 1915, coincidentally the same year Haidar began her stage career, James L. Barton and Cleveland H. Dodge founded the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (later known as Near East Relief). Near East Relief grew very powerful once the United States entered World War I and the country literally battled the perpetrators of the Assyrian genocide. By that time, Near East Relief already had offices throughout most of the country and Haidar had created a modest stage career for herself. She recognized an opportunity in working with Near East Relief. Their offices had connections to churches,

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<sup>26</sup> “Little Egypt, Oriental Charmer of 1893, Sues; Says Film Version Does Her Wrong,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 30, 1936.

<sup>27</sup> Haidar, *Under Syrian Stars*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 25:40.

Chautauqua meetings, and all sorts of American Evangelical audiences who fetishized the Middle East. Thus, working in collaboration with Near East Relief, Haidar expanded her work throughout the entire United States.

From the hundreds of newspaper articles advertising or reviewing one of Haidar's many performances, we know Haidar produced her shows at no cost to the audience. However, most advertisements stated at the end of the article that "admission will be free but a silver offering will be taken,"<sup>29</sup> or "no admission, but an offering will be taken for Syrian relief work."<sup>30</sup> Her labors clearly helped Near East Relief swell its coffers.<sup>31</sup> How Haidar and Near East Relief divided this collection is unknown but with most audiences numbering in the hundreds, and some in the thousands, Haidar's shows likely proved remarkably profitable for all parties involved.<sup>32</sup> Collecting funds at Chautauqua assemblies, church services, and other Christian-centric gatherings, Near East Relief garnered over \$100 million in donations during Haidar's career.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "Syrian Princess to Appear at the Methodist Church," *Anaconda Standard*, March 29, 1917; "Native of Holy Land to Speak," *Great Falls Tribune*, June 3, 1917; "Syrian Princess Will Address Meeting Held in Local Church Sunday," *Eugene Guard*, April 5, 1919.

<sup>30</sup> "Less Theology Alden Advises," *Traverse City Record-Eagle*, August 14, 1926.

<sup>31</sup> "Story of the Bible Lands," *Vicksburg Herald*, May 5, 1920; "Princess Tell of Syrian Conditions," *Natchez Democrat*, May 11, 1920; "Princess Haidar Visits Central," *Arkansas Democrat*, October 22, 1920.

<sup>32</sup> "Large Audience Hears Syrian Princess at Baptist Church," *The Eugene Guard*, April 7, 1919; "Princess Rahme Haider," *Corvallis Gazette-Times*, March 22, 1919; "Princess Lectures to Large Audience," *Joplin Globe*, October 25, 1921.

<sup>33</sup> "History," Who We Are, Near East Foundation, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.near-east.org/who-we-are/>; "Near East Relief and the Armenian Genocide," Encyclopedia Entries on the Armenian Genocide, Educational Resources, Armenian National Institute, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.armenian-genocide.org/ner.html>.

Evoking Biblical images of sacrificial offerings and payments of silver, a Haidar performance began as soon as one read the advertisement. Working with a press secretary, Haidar's show advertisements grew more refined as her career progressed.<sup>34</sup> A typical advertisement opened with essentially the same biography for Haidar. The periodicals usually mentioned her collegiate training, the places she had recently performed, her relationship to either the Chautauqua circuit or Near East Relief, and her Middle Eastern origins.

Next, the periodical typically mentioned how the details of Haidar's life influenced her performances. This segues into a description of "traditional" Middle Eastern costumes, musical numbers, and dances that Haidar promised to exhibit throughout her act. Finally, most advertisements close with a description of who aided Haidar in these performances and other miscellaneous details, such as the admission price statement. The repetition of these advertisements over decades indicates they met the intended goal for them to entice paying audiences through an initial textual performance. But good artists pack their material with subtext and Haidar's advertisements prove no exception.

The biographical information included in these ads did more than entice audiences. Haidar lived at a time in which white Americans had a bifurcated approach to Middle Easterners. White Americans felt comfortable donating money, foodstuffs, and clothing to Middle Easterners who lived *in* the Middle East but the distance between these two groups proved essential to maintaining this relationship. As Middle Eastern communities living in the United States grew larger, the ability of white Americans to fetishize Middle Easterners became harder. Additionally, the safe distance at which white Americans

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<sup>34</sup> "Ex-Newspaper Man Press Agent for the Princess," *Vicksburg Evening Post*, May 5, 1920.

held early Arab American communities fractured once Middle Eastern immigrants started settling in predominantly white communities and these two groups had to negotiate daily inhabiting the same spaces.

This erosion of white America's ability to fetishize the Middle East resulted in an environment where white communities collected funds for Middle Easterners in the morning and committed horrible acts of racial violence under the cover of night. As a Middle Eastern immigrant woman traveling throughout the southern United States during the apex of Jim Crow, Haidar knew her audience had the potential to beat, rape, and even lynch her. As Middle Easterners became more common in the United States, the stakes for Haidar grew and so too did the boldness of her claims. Unsurprisingly, her alleged proximity to Jesus Christ became more intimate and her claims of royal lineage grew more unique the more common Middle Easterners became in the lives of white Americans.<sup>35</sup>

From romanticizing the notion of a silver offering to charting her lineage back through the book of Genesis, Haidar seemed to understand that her persona attracted audiences and kept her safe from harassment. Some researchers who have written about Haidar interpret her education, travel, and personality as her positioning herself

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<sup>35</sup> Akram Khater, "How the Lebanese Became White?," Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies News, NC State University, November 20, 2014, <https://lebanesestudies.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2014/11/20/how-the-lebanese-became-white/>; Caroline Muglia, "'Syrians' and Race in the 1920s," Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies News, NC State University, April 27, 2016, <https://lebanesestudies.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2016/04/27/syrians-and-race-in-the-1920s/>; Akram Khater, "Fighting Injustice: The Story of Herbert Nassour," Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies News, NC State University, March 25, 2019, <https://lebanesestudies.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2019/03/25/fighting-injustice-the-story-of-herbert-nassour/>.

above other immigrants of the Middle East as if she was ashamed of her reality.<sup>36</sup> However, Haidar's legacy is much less self-centered. She used her skills and ruses to deconstruct the Orientalist gaze that negatively affected all members of the Middle Eastern diaspora. Her work benefited her personally, but she did it for the betterment of all Middle Eastern people.

If Haidar sought only personal gain, she could have constructed a very successful career from belly dancing and parodying other Middle Eastern traditions for predominantly white American audiences as Middle Eastern performers and white actors portraying "Arabs" had done before. She did not self-Orientalize, however. Instead, she reclaimed these tropes. She repeatedly mentioned costumes and music in her advertisements, knowing the unfamiliarity most American Evangelicals had with Middle Eastern culture. Enticing men to attend one of her performances by playing on their hypersexualized imaginations of Middle Eastern women, Haidar challenged their worldview by beginning her shows wearing more clothes than they would have ever expected for an "authentic" belly dancer. Only as a "princess" could Haidar infiltrate these spaces and hold authority in this way. She did not intend her role as a princess to place her above other Middle Eastern immigrants as much as she worked her character to destabilize Orientalism subliminally through seemingly inconspicuous entertainment.

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<sup>36</sup> Amanda Eads, "Rahme Haidar – the Writer," Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies News, NC State University, March 30, 2016, <https://lebanesestudies.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2016/03/30/rahme-haidar-the-writer/>.

**BROTHERHOOD CAST FOR “ROMANCE OF RUTH”**



Figure 1. “Brotherhood Cast for ‘Romance of Ruth,’” *Wilkes-Barres Times Leader, the Evening News*, May 28, 1934

Like any good performer, Haidar saved her best material for last. The closing remarks of most advertisements for Haidar's shows—the most seemingly innocent part of these ads—contained the deepest of subtexts. Most periodicals closed an advertisement or review for one of Haidar's performances with a statement about those who intended to join or joined her as a part of the performance. Haidar became known for frequently sharing the stage with members of the audience. Figure 1 is a sample of the 100-person ensemble Haidar compiled to help “present the Oriental production, ‘The Romance of Ruth’ . . . written by the Princess Rahme Haidar, a native of the Holy Land, and staged under her personal direction” in Wilkes-Barr, Pennsylvania, in 1934. Finding a photograph of the ensemble is rare. Haidar casting the audience and incorporating them into her performance happened quite

often, however. Typically, newspapers ended advertisements and reviews of a Haidar performance with “the cast includes the following:” and then a score or more of names.<sup>37</sup> Implicating locals in her interpretation of Biblical stories, Haidar added to her security for audiences are always less likely to criticize that which they help create.

When Haidar began her career as a traveling performer, she toured up and down the West Coast of the United States. In early 1916, she found herself performing her adaptation of the Biblical story of Naaman the Leper in Washington state. On February 16, 1916, the *Tacoma Times* published an advertisement for one of her performances and included a list of community members who would perform as a part of the ensemble. This list would be as ordinary as any other had it not been for the name Lucille Burgess.<sup>38</sup> At the time, Burgess was approximately 22 years old, living in her father’s house, and had no occupation.<sup>39</sup> Although literate and educated in the musical arts, Burgess had few opportunities to use her talents. Like Haidar, her community had stifling expectations for her.

Very few details regarding the formative stages of Burgess and Haidar’s relationship are available. They seem to have both attended USC at the same time but documents mentioning this coincidence do not make much of their time together on campus. The newspaper advertisements

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<sup>37</sup> “Syrian Princess will Appear in Damascus Play,” *Star Tribune*, February 21, 1926; “Unique Production to be Seen Here,” *Harrisburg Sunday Courier*, April 14, 1935; “Local Cast to Help Princess Present Drama,” *Shamokin News-Dispatch*, June 5, 1935.

<sup>38</sup> “Real Princess to Appear in Biblical Play,” *The Tacoma Times*, February 17, 1916.

<sup>39</sup> 1910 U.S. Census, Pierce County, Washington, population schedule, Tacoma Ward 7, Precinct 5, sheet 7B, enumeration district (ED) 280, dwelling 149, family 153, Lucille Burgess; NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 1178.

tracking Haidar's travels offer us some insights, however. As previously stated, in mid-February 1916, Burgess performed in one of Haidar's adapted Biblical stories as part of a much larger ensemble of community members. A little over a week later, another advertisement stated Haidar "[was] spending the month in Tacoma."<sup>40</sup> Her month stay was presumably almost finished by the time of this article's publication because her stay began in early February and her last recorded performance in Tacoma during this period happened on 5 March.<sup>41</sup>

Instead of appearing in the newspaper of a nearby town by mid-March, as a follower of Haidar's movements could expect, Haidar vanished from the public eye. She remerged five months later but was still in Tacoma, far outstaying her initial month-long visit. The advertisement for Haidar's July 1916 performance in Tacoma was very sparse. In a single sentence, the periodical commented on Haidar's Middle Eastern heritage, her costume selection, and provided the essential information regarding the time and place of her performance.<sup>42</sup> Haidar's show went presumably well but we cannot know with certainty because, after this July performance, she disappeared again. Emerging four months later in Pullman, Washington, Haidar appears to have finally moved on, but a little piece of Tacoma came with her.

Forevermore listed as Haidar's "traveling companion" in the acknowledgment section of most advertisements for her shows, Burgess seemed to officially sign on as a part of Haidar's troupe during her extended stay in Tacoma.<sup>43</sup>

No source explicitly acknowledged an amorous relationship between Burgess and Haidar. Burgess was always euphemistically described in advertisements as

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<sup>40</sup> "Princess in Tacoma Pulpit," *Tacoma Times*, February 26, 1916.

<sup>41</sup> "Here and Elsewhere," *Tacoma Times*, March 3, 1916.

<sup>42</sup> "Personal and Social," *Tacoma Times*, July 28, 1916.

<sup>43</sup> "Real Live Princess will Visit Pullman," *Pullman Herald*, November 24, 1916.

Haidar's "traveling companion,"<sup>44</sup> "talented musician,"<sup>45</sup> "American college friend,"<sup>46</sup> "able assistant,"<sup>47</sup> or "secretary."<sup>48</sup> Moreover, because they traveled together constantly, any personal discourse shared between them happened over dinner tables, on the road, and in hotel rooms. Thus, the written record lacks a variety of documents with even coded references to their lesbianism. But if Burgess and Haidar's play *Romance of Ruth* (where Haidar played Naomi and Burgess played Ruth) was in the tradition of works like Anderson's *Pity for Women*, then *Romance of Ruth* was the greatest evidence of their relationship *and* their intimate knowledge of the existing lesbian community.<sup>49</sup>

### Conclusion

Although Burgess and Haidar's adaptation of Ruth and Naomi's story predates *Pity for Women*, I am hesitant to claim their play as "the first" in this tradition of lesbians using Ruth and Naomi's story to normalize same-sex

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<sup>44</sup> "Real Live Princess will Visit Pullman," *Pullman Herald*, November 24, 1916; "Syrian Princess Native of Lebanon will Speak Here," *Austin American-Statesman*, December 6, 1919; "Princess of Syria will Lecture Here," *Pensacola News Journal*, Sunday, April 30, 1922.

<sup>45</sup> "Rahme Haider, Syrian Princess, Lincoln Visitor," *The Lincoln Star*, July 28, 1918; "Real Princess of Syria to Lecture Here Sunday," *Natchez Democrat*, May 8, 1920; "Princess of Syria, Santa Fe Guest, will Speak at Churches Sunday," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, July 14, 1922.

<sup>46</sup> "Princess Rahme is to Speak in the Baptist Church," *The Ogden Standard*, June 29, 1917; "Princess of Syria is to Speak Twice in Miami Tomorrow," *Miami News*, February 12, 1921; "Syrian Princess," *Daily Press*, April 19, 1932.

<sup>47</sup> "Oriental Drama Presented Here," *Waco News-Tribune*, April 11, 1933.

<sup>48</sup> "Princess of Syria is Guest in Local Home," *Republican-Northwestern*, July 2, 1926; "Local Cast to Help Princess Present Drama," *Shamokin News-Dispatch*, June 5, 1935.

<sup>49</sup> "Romance of Ruth will be Repeated," [*Wilkes-Barre*] *Evening News*, June 6, 1934.

relationships. I shy away from branding them first not only because their method to destabilize heteronormative understandings of love proves more subliminal than Anderson's. More significantly, thanks to recent scholarship on the "long civil rights movement," historians seem to frequently debunk firsts as new research and interpretations come to light. I also argue firsts are detrimental to understanding civil rights history generally. Even if Haidar and Burgess first adapted Ruth and Naomi's story to the stage, to claim them as first severs them from other lesbians who likely interpreted Ruth and Naomi's story as one of queer love long before Haidar and Burgess staged the tale. While the concept of firsts and other superlatives can greatly help historians, they can also sever acts of resistance from the unknown ancestors whose critical thinking and creativity truly generated these concepts.

From 1919 until at least 1935, Haidar and Burgess performed the story of Ruth and Naomi dozens of times. All reviews and advertisements suggest their audiences never noticed the subtext of their show. However, the fact that Haidar stopped performing in 1935 and suffered a heart attack a year earlier is very telling. Considering Anderson published *Pity for Women* only two years later, perhaps the connection between lesbianism and the story of Ruth and Naomi became more apparent to mainstream audiences. Perhaps being a Middle Eastern lesbian who spent decades conning thousands of American Evangelicals in multiple ways added too much stress to Haidar's heart. Sexuality is not biological. But fear of exposure possibly made sexuality biological for Haidar, resulting in a heart condition that led to her premature death in 1939.<sup>50</sup>

Did the political landscape become too dangerous

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<sup>50</sup> Certificate of Death for Rahme Haidar, 14 November 1939, File No. 94207, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Health Bureau of Vital Statistics.

for Haidar and Burgess to continue their charade? It appears so. Before the Progressives criminalized and medicalized sexuality, same-sex relationships proved quite possible. Even amidst the Progressive era, same-sex relationships between women remained somewhat permissible. In her groundbreaking article, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues “nineteenth-century women routinely formed emotional ties with other women” and these “deeply felt, same-sex friendships were casually accepted in American society.”<sup>51</sup> “However, this love between women began to be seen as threatening to the social order,” according to Linnea Stenson. Stenson argues, “the turn of the century found a new and hostile position formed about female relationships and communities, where changing social and cultural attitudes actively worked to discourage behavior they had earlier worked to foster.”<sup>52</sup> Beginning their careers at the start of this transition, Burgess and Haidar’s ability to infiltrate and hold space in heteronormative communities diminished greatly with time and, by the 1930s, their secret would not have remained a secret long.

The evidence of their secret hopefully yields future research into same-sex desire in early Arab American communities, which is glaringly absent from the existing body of scholarship. Burgess and Haidar's story also supplements the canon of Arab American histories, which focus almost exclusively on men and the written record. Here are two women who performed their way across the

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<sup>51</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1, no. 1 (1975): 1.

<sup>52</sup> Linnea A. Stenson, “From Isolation to Diversity: Self and Communities in Twentieth-Century Lesbian Novels,” in *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism*, ed. Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 209-10.

United States much earlier than anyone else, while one crafted her publicity machine. With the help of Burgess, Haidar concocted a persona larger than life that destabilized Orientalism using methods that make her almost seem outside time.