Q: Why has the story of Little Syria, from over a century ago, resonated so strongly with you in your work today?

Omar:

I've always wanted my work to serve as a bridge between cultures & generations, giving the different communities I'm rooted in an opportunity to appreciate each other’s perspectives. My upbringing was unique in that I immigrated to this country with my family when I was four but was able to maintain a strong linguistic & cultural connection to Syria both at home & in school. In other words, I grew up memorizing/reciting both Arabic poetry AND 90s hip-hop music simultaneously. It was only a matter of time before I started to connect the two in a meaningful way.

The neighborhood of Little Syria fascinates me in that it birthed an important wave of writers & poets whom, speaking directly to the migrant experience in America from Greater Syria (present-day Syria / Lebanon / Palestine / Jordan), were, in turn, helping to usher along a renaissance of modern poetry & literature in the Arab world more broadly. They were in many ways doing the cultural & generational bridge-building I strive to do with my work today.

Given the sheer magnitude of the Syrian refugee crisis in recent years, we are likely going to see many similar immigrant neighborhood stories develop across the world over the next few decades. I hope that my Little Syria performance project gives more people an opportunity to feel connected to this important chapter of our shared history; to feel anchored in these stories and the possibilities they hold for future interpretations of identity & global citizenry.

Q: How could this story resonate with K-12 teachers and students today? What would you want teachers to know about this history?

Omar:

Some of America’s first impressions of the Arab world came from this community (& others like it that sprouted up across the US in cities like Boston & Detroit), where the foundations of Arab-American identity were being laid. From the invention of the ice cream cone at a St Louis World’s Fair to witnessing the rise of the third-best-selling poet of all time in Khalil Gibran, their collective impact on American culture has been far-reaching.

It is a narrative that I imagine would tie in well with classroom discussions of immigration, American nativism, race/whiteness, journalism, poetry/prose, and media / popular culture. There were a couple of dozen newspapers being published by residents of the neighborhood in Arabic & English around the turn of the century, which for only a few thousand people is pretty impressive (and several can now be accessed online through museum & university archives). There were also a number of articles written about the community by larger NYC publications, oftentimes framed with an orientalist & xenophobic lens, which can be quite telling when juxtaposed to today’s headlines about Syrians / immigrants/refugees/ etc.

One magazine I’m especially intrigued by is Al-Funun, an arts-based publication that featured the writings of many members of the famed Pen League https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pen_League ... It contained poetry, essays, short stories, translations of important literary works from America / Europe, illustrations, advertisements, and even a humor section at the end. I’d like to offer readers this rough translation of one of my favorite passages:

*Turn-of-the-century public schools in NYC are very diverse. In one such classroom, a history teacher asked an unsuspecting student: “Who discovered America?”*  
The student looked at his classmates nervously & smiled back at the teacher saying: “Can you please ask me a different question?”  
To which she replied: “Why? Don’t you know the answer to such an easy question?”  
He responded: “Actually I do, but you see my friends & I were debating this very subject after school yesterday and ...
Pat O’Brien insisted that ‘it was an Irish priest!’

Olof said he was ‘sure it was a Norwegian sea-captain!’

Giovanni exclaimed ‘NO it was Christopher Columbus!’

Sam Khoury said ‘Nay it was a Phoenician sailor!’

Ali Ahmed said ‘No No it was an Arab explorer!’

... and if you were privy to the level of violence that ensued you might have thought twice about asking a young boy like me such a bold question.”

Who discovered America? (Al-Funun publication vol 2 no 1 - June 1916 issue - humor section)

https://lebanesestudies.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/items/show/16285#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0

Q: For educators interested in learning more about Arab American Heritage Month and how “West Asia” fits within Asian Pacific American narratives, what would you share with them?

Omar:

Terms like “Middle East” & “West Asia” are relatively arbitrary general directions/designations in my opinion; but they do somewhat help to convey that this region was historically at the fulcrum of Asian, African and European experiences. By not siloing historical information into separate/limiting categories, we might paint a more holistic picture of where & how our traditions intersect. Deep connections from the Silk Road trade routes have fostered the growth of civilizations & development of languages, religions, sciences, cuisines, philosophies, & politics across continents for several millennia. Regional cultures & histories have always overlapped in that part of the world — so it’s important for educators in the US to complicate stale notions of geography/identity.

I feel that the various immigrant & hyphenated-identity experiences in America are no different in that our family journeys to the US, the value & belief systems we strive to uphold, the racial profiling & dual-loyalty questions we are often confronted with, & the struggles with assimilation that subsequent generations face, have similar impacts on our communities ... Throughout the course of my career, I’ve found that art, poetry, & music can be extremely effective conduits for transmitting cultural information in a heartfelt way & learning about some of the complexities & nuance therein.