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Specters of America in Students' Rhetorical Activism at Syrian Protestant College

Syrian Protestant College (SPC) experienced two significant moments of student protest and rhetorical activism between 1866 and 1920; together, these crises disrupted the usual workings of the college and demanded responses from the college faculty and administrators as well as from local and regional community members. These crises reveal how the college constructed an imagined America through its curriculum and policies and how students learned the limits of belonging to this idea(l) through their literate action. In this chapter, I analyze how the idea—or specter—of America was invoked rhetorically to forward these two moments of student protest. The first moment, known as the “Lewis Affair,” occurred in 1882 as a response to the forced resignation of a respected professor, Dr. Edwin Lewis, in the medical school. The second, known as the “Muslim Controversy,” occurred during the academic year 1908–1909 and was sparked after an Islamophobic sermon was delivered during the chapel service, which all SPC students, including Muslim and Jewish students, were required to attend.

Although the students who participated in these protests were not, ultimately, successful in changing SPC's decisions, both moments are significant for this study in the ways that they reveal the strong ties that bind literacy education to American nationalism and religious ideology. For example, during the 1882 crisis, students at first characterized America and its affiliated values in a positive light, as model citizens would, but their rhetoric shifted in a final petition to the administration, in which they critiqued the “noble, pious American people” who had unfairly broken the promise of equal opportunity that they believed an American education would afford (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 67). During the 1909 protest, students conjured what they knew of America to critique the administration's religious requirement. The 1909 controversy generated conversation—and controversy—beyond the college and throughout the region, inspiring anti-Western rhetoric grounded on a growing sense of Arab identity and Muslim unity.

This chapter adds to the evidence showing how literacy education has historically been used to maintain colonial markers of identity that determine

who is included and who is excluded from an imagined America. As discussed in Chapter 1, literacy in the US has been linked to American nationalist ideology since at least the late 19th century, as Americanization educational programs were developed to create ideal citizens out of the waves of immigrants from outside of Western Europe who arrived in the US (see Kendall Theado, 2013; NeCamp, 2014) and as Jim Crow laws in the American South used (lack of) literacy as a weapon to prevent former slaves from exercising their right to vote. More recently, rhetoric and writing scholars and program administrators have used the idea of citizenship, according to Wan (2011), as an “ambient” (and ambiguous) label to describe a range of literate actions and behaviors that, they imply, can produce citizens (pp. 30–33). Wring scholars, program leaders, and teachers base this connection between literacy and citizenship on the assumption that literacy has the potential to lead to productive engagement with(in) democracy. Wan (2011) noted that this idea of citizenship is problematic insofar as it suggests that citizenship is achievable by individual behavior or activity and is a means through which equality and social mobility can be gained (pp. 29–30). This claim ultimately rests upon and reinforces a colonial epistemology that draws on a “rhetoric of modernity” in which individualism and the nation-state are privileged (Mignolo, 2007, p. 464). Ana Milena Ribero (2016) added the observation that in the US, citizenship is racialized through exclusion, in that it is “marked on the body through phenotypical characteristics (e.g., skin color, hair texture) and social traits (e.g., clothing, mannerisms, language use)” (p. 35). To be successful, the embodied performance of citizenship must fit dominant discourses of citizenship (Ribero, 2016, p. 40). When connected to literacy education, the idea of citizenship amounts to a mere “aspiration, a promise” that can easily be broken—which SPC students learned as they attempted to perform certain “habits of citizenship” but found them insufficient for provoking change (Wan, 2011, p. 46).¹

During the two moments of crisis discussed in this chapter, SPC students articulated their sense of American cultural citizenship, something Wan (2011) described as a “state of being” rather than static legal category (p. 37), while at the same time finding the limits of belonging to the American

1 It is important to note that there are some limitations in applying Wan’s (2011) argument to SPC, in that Wan’s focus is on U.S. contexts of literacy education, and SPC students generally did not aspire to emigrate to the US or to become American citizens (though some Syrians did emigrate to the US around the turn of the 20th century). The point I am making in this chapter, however, is precisely that the example of SPC shows how ideologies associated with American-style literacy education extend beyond national borders. American national, religious, and linguistic ideologies were promoted at SPC and sent the message that literacy itself would allow students to enjoy full rights and inclusion at the American college.

college. This citizenship by performance if not by law informed students' strategic construction and deployment of an imagined America in their responses to the crises. They used this construction to speak to college administrators and other stakeholders against injustices they perceived to be antithetical to the American values and beliefs espoused within the curriculum and also to critique America as it was symbolized in and through the college itself. The college's (American) faculty's and administrators' responses to the crises expose deeply held racist and xenophobic attitudes about Arab students, which in turn highlights the colonial epistemology—the specter of America that students discovered—underlying the college's curriculum and policies. This epistemology ran up against local values and beliefs that promoted Arab unity and, in the second protest, Muslim identity. Together, the crises reveal contradictory definitions of and desires for American-style literacy education and the impasse created when two competing epistemologies meet in the context of literacy education. These contradictions continue to shape contemporary literacy education in and outside of the US today.

The “First Student Rebellion in the Arab World:” The 1882 Lewis Affair

What has been called “the first student rebellion in the Arab world” occurred at SPC in 1882 (Zeidan, as cited in Leavitt, 1981, p. 97; Jeha, 2004, p. 52). Sixteen years after the college opened, 160 students were enrolled (see Appendix A for demographic details), and administrators, faculty, and students all held a stake in seeing the school succeed, albeit for different reasons. The crisis, alternately called the “Lewis Affair” (Farag, 1972; Leavitt, 1981) or the “Darwin Affair” (B. S. Anderson, 2011), occurred after a professor in the medical department, Dr. Edwin Lewis, gave the college's commencement address in July 1882. His speech, given in Arabic, was titled “Knowledge, Science, and Wisdom.” In the address, Lewis set out to define the terms in the title, and he illustrated the term *science*—which he defined as the active construction of knowledge—with reference to the work of scientists Charles Lyell, Louis Pasteur, and Charles Darwin, the latter of whom had died only a few months before. In the speech, Lewis acknowledged the public controversy surrounding Darwin's theory of evolution, suggesting that “his theory was opposed by enemies and antagonists because his doctrine led to the nullification of certain ideas strongly adhered to by the people as though they were part of their religion” (as cited in Leavitt, 1981, p. 86). Lewis gently promoted the validity of the theory in his speech, pointing out that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was based on 20 years of

quantitative research. Darwin, Lewis argued, applied the high standards of the scientific method that had been used by Lyell before him, noting that Darwin was “an example of the transformation of knowledge into science by long and careful examination and accurate thinking,” thus exemplifying the ways in which science would—and should—build upon pre-existing knowledge (as cited in Leavitt, 1981, p. 85).² Lewis was ultimately forced to resign by SPC leaders, and the majority of the medical faculty also resigned in support.

In the sections that follow, I examine the rhetoric surrounding the crisis, in which can be seen SPC faculty and administrators negotiating internal disagreements about the religious and moral identity of the college as well as the value of Western scientific knowledge. This dispute was relevant to the college’s identity as an American institution and its relationship with the local American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) Syrian mission and the region *writ large*. Perhaps more significantly, for students, the crisis represented a failure of the college to uphold its promise of offering an American education and to act according to what they assumed were American values—values represented in and through SPC’s approach to education. In addressing and eventually resolving this crisis, students and faculty articulated these differences into contradictory visions about the meaning of SPC, arriving at a definition that many found unsatisfactory but that would outline the direction of the college for years to come. The contradictory assumptions and values that emerge in the rhetoric surrounding the crisis illustrate the devastating effects of colonial epistemology carried out in the name of education, particularly literacy education. Students’ deployment of literate action during this crisis reveals their own agency while at the same time illustrating the impossibility of achieving the cultural citizenship seemingly on offer at SPC. In the following sections, I first discuss the faculty response, then turn to the student response, and then discuss how the crisis was resolved with implications for the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies.

2 Hisham Sharabi (1970) discussed the influence of John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Henry Huxley on Arab Christian intellectuals in Syria; the ideas of these philosophers and scientists were mostly imported to the region by American- or British-educated Syrians (pp. 68–70). Darwin was translated into Arabic by Shibili Shumayyil, an 1871 graduate of SPC. In 1910, Shumayyil published a book on Darwin’s theory of evolution (called *The Philosophy of Education and Progress*). He also wrote multiple articles about Darwinism in the regional Arabic-language magazines *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal*. Sharabi noted that there was controversy surrounding Darwin in Syria in the 1890s and 1900s, and the points raised against Darwin were similar to those of British Victorians a generation earlier (1860s and 1870s). See also Albert Hourani (1983).

Faculty Response

The varied responses to Lewis' address by SPC faculty and administrators expose the lack of consensus regarding the identity and mission of the American college among local and international stakeholders. Lewis' speech was published in the Cairo-based Arabic-language journal *al-Muqtataf* (المقتطف), or "The Extract"), which was founded by Syrians (Jeha, 2004).³ After the speech's publication, Dr. James Dennis, an ABCFM missionary, wrote a letter to the editors of *al-Muqtataf* deriding Lewis's speech. The journal then published defenses by Lewis as well as a recent graduate of SPC in the following issue. Shortly after Lewis's speech and as the debate in *al-Muqtataf* advanced, Dennis, President Bliss, and Dr. George Post, the only faculty member in the medical school who did not support Lewis, wrote to David Stuart Dodge, secretary of SPC's New York-based Board of Trustees (BOT), to call for Lewis' dismissal from the faculty (Farag, 1972, p. 78). Meanwhile, Lewis translated his speech into English, received approval of its contents from a Protestant clergyman in the United States, and sent both to Dr. William Booth, President of the BOT, for his assessment (Farag, 1972, p. 79).⁴ Ultimately, Lewis' proof—while perhaps persuasive to Booth—was not enough to overpower the pressure of the local mission, in combination with the opinions of Bliss, Post, and Dodge. The BOT accepted Lewis's resignation on December 2, 1882.

The fallout from Lewis' forced resignation was rapid: On December 18, Cornelius Van Dyck and his son William, a new member of the medical faculty, submitted their resignations (Jeha, 2004).⁵ Dr. Richard Brigstocke, a member of the medical faculty and also of the local Board of Managers (BOM), resigned in March 1883 after his attempts to request a meeting

3 Khalidi (1991a) described *al-Muqtataf*, among other Cairo-based journals, as influential in the development of Arab nationalism: "More immediately relevant, several influential Arabist political groupings, such as *Hizb al-lamarkaziyya al-idariyya al-'uthmani* (the Ottoman Administrative Decentralization Party) were founded in Cairo. Journalists prominent in the press of Syria and Istanbul wrote in the Cairo press and often spent long periods in that city, as did many Arabist politicians during periods of repression by the CUP [Committee of Union and Progress]. Egypt was the home of a number of highly influential publications founded by Syrians—for example, *al-Manar*, *al-Muqattam*, *al-Abram*, *al-Muqtataf*, and *al-Hilal*, all of which contributed significantly to the development of Arabic-language journalism and of Arabism" (p. 61). See also Hourani (1983).

4 It is not clear whether the speech was sent to Reverend Sell of the Union Theological Seminary or Julius Seelye at Amherst College; Nadia Farag (1972) cited the former while Shafik Jeha (2004) cited the latter, and the archives do not provide any additional evidence.

5 William Van Dyck is credited for being the first to bring Darwin—through *On the Origin of Species*—to campus in 1880, when Van Dyck was hired (Jeha, 2004, pp. 35–36).

between the BOM and Bliss were ignored (Jeha, 2004, p. 86). John Wortabet also protested the administration's actions loudly and officially resigned from the medical faculty after Lewis was dismissed.⁶ Within several weeks of Lewis' resignation, then, SPC's medical school was reduced to only one faculty member: Post. While SPC dealt with the potential closure of the medical school, it was also forced to confront internal and external pressures demanding a clear definition of the college's identity as the most prominent American college in the region, particularly in relation to local and global stakeholders.

There are a number of reasons why Lewis' address led to a controversy at SPC: First, and perhaps most obviously, the theory of evolution was new and controversial—but in the region, perhaps this was only true for Protestants. Shafik Jeha (2004) noted that it was unlikely that Darwin's theory of evolution would have been controversial to anyone but the Protestant members of SPC, who constituted a minority of the student body (the Christian students were mostly Maronite or Orthodox; others were Muslim and Jewish; see Appendix A).⁷ In contrast, the entire faculty and administration of SPC was Protestant. While the text of Lewis' speech does not appear to promote the theory as a matter of fact, some of the more conservative members of the commencement audience—particularly those affiliated with the ABCFM—may have been troubled by any reference to Darwin, as it could presumably be misconstrued as a subversion of the Protestant mission of the college.

Second, the publication of the speech presented a number of problems for the SPC administration: The speech became publicly available for the local community beyond the college, and the journal in which it was published was directly affiliated with SPC, as it was edited by two Syrian SPC graduates, Ya'qub Sarruf (B.A. 1870) and Faris Nimr (B.A. 1874), who were also instructors in the medical school. Probably torn between the expectations of international and regional sponsors and local realities, it is likely that SPC administrators worried that the publication of the address and subsequent responses would signify for a wider audience institutional support for, or at least serious consideration of, Darwin's controversial theories—and this suggestion could inflame the college's financial and religious sponsors in the region and abroad.⁸

6 After his resignation, Wortabet remained as a lecturer under special arrangement with SPC until 1890. Also note the discussion later in this section on Sarruf and Nimr's appointments after the 1882 crisis, which were later rescinded.

7 Jeha (2004) asserted this to contradict Jessup's claim that the administration was worried about the local Muslim community's response.

8 For further information about SPC's financial supporters, see Tibawi (1967).

Third, and as Chapter 3 explicates more fully, the college faculty had voted in 1878 to change the language of instruction from Arabic to English, but the medical faculty were resistant to the change. The majority of faculty in the medical department were fluent in Arabic and several had deeper connections to the region than the newer hires in the Collegiate Department.⁹ Lewis was fluent in Arabic by the time he gave his speech; he had been hired only four years after the college's founding. What's more, the medical faculty had been producing teaching materials and translating textbooks from English to Arabic for the benefit of their students since the founding of the college, and they were not ready, at the time of the 1878 faculty vote, to give up Arabic as the language of instruction (*Annual Reports*). In short, the medical faculty's resistance to the change in language of instruction at SPC represented a deeper divide within the faculty about the role of the American college in Syria, as well as the kind of literacy education the college intended to provide for its students. While I show in Chapter 3 that the justification for either Arabic or English as the language of instruction was premised upon colonial thinking, the medical faculty's commitment to translating Western knowledge into Arabic can also be seen as a commitment to providing the local population with access to resources that could benefit them. When SPC changed the language of instruction—and thus its orientation toward literacy and student identity—perhaps the medical faculty felt that the college had distanced itself and the education it provided from the local population it was meant to serve.

What's more, the revised language policy explicitly privileged foreign faculty and underlined the lesser role that local faculty were meant to play in SPC's educational project. The son of an Armenian Protestant, Wortabet was the only professorial-rank faculty member born in Syria at SPC, and after his resignation, SPC would not assign any Syrian faculty member professorial rank status until 1909, nor would any locally born faculty member at any rank gain voting rights until 1920 (B. S. Anderson, 2011, p. 48).¹⁰ This shift in policy,

9 In particular, Cornelius Van Dyck, who was well known in the region for his role in translating the Bible into Arabic while an ABCFM missionary, and John Wortabet, who was a native of Syria, were both notable in their ties and contributions to the local culture and community. Cornelius Van Dyck was trained in the United States as a physician and began work as a missionary to Syria in 1840. He was well known for his impressive proficiency in Arabic, which culminated in a modern translation of the Bible into Arabic (with Eli Smith, who died before the translation was published in 1865). Wortabet was an Armenian Protestant who was ordained as a preacher in 1853 by the Syrian ABCFM mission. Both were involved in the founding of SPC in 1866. For further information on these figures, see Jessup (1910/2002) and Brian VanDeMark (2012).

10 According to Jeha (2004), following the 1882 crisis, Sarruf and Nimr, editors of

too, went against SPC's original intention of establishing a college that would eventually be run by local faculty (Salibi & Khoury, 1995, pp. 56–57). The language change, therefore, maintained a power differential between local and foreign constituents of the college and sent a clear message to all that they must perform a foreign cultural identity—and thus strive for a kind of “cultural citizenship” (Wan, 2011, p. 37)—in order to succeed at SPC.

All of these factors contributed to the controversy surrounding Lewis' speech. At stake, then, was the college's identity as the American college in the region, as well as the identity of its students. The faculty's and students' responses to the controversy help illuminate the false promises of American-style education abroad and the limits of the cultural citizenship students tried to adopt through their rhetorical performance. Colonial epistemology dictated the boundaries of what action, particularly literate action, was “acceptable” and within the bounds of the American national imaginary (see Ribero, 2016). The exchanges and interactions among faculty, administrators, and students rhetorically constituted a vision of America that was inseparable from the college founders' American Protestant identity. In turn, this definition of America framed the college's expectations for its “ideal” student, who would adopt and employ American ways of thinking and knowing—in part through English literacy—within the Arab world. This “ideal” student was certainly not expected to use the discourses or ideologies of America to critique American institutions such as SPC.

Student Response

In addition to the resignation of its faculty, SPC was faced with another, perhaps more immediate, crisis: a student strike. The day of Lewis' resignation, between 40 and 50 students, most of them from the Medical Department and a few from the other branch of the college, the Collegiate Department, organized to protest the administration's decision (Jeha, 2004). The students acted quickly: On Sunday, December 3, they attended required chapel services but refused to sing the hymns. On Monday, December 4, the students stopped attending classes. The students met in the college halls or at the city's Prussian Hospital, which at the time hosted the medical department, and they quickly elected a president, a treasurer, writers, and a speechmaker for the group. Together, they began to write.

al-Muqtataf, were promised adjunct professor appointments in chemistry and physics (Sarruf) and mathematics (Nimr) by SPC in three years, on October 1, 1885. But at the end of the academic year 1883–84, SPC terminated the contract and dismissed both. In 1890, SPC awarded honorary doctorates to both, but neither attended the ceremony (Jeha, 2004, pp. 121–36).

Over the course of a few weeks, between December 5, 1882, and the end of the month, the students wrote a series of seven petitions to the faculty and the college's BOM.¹¹ According to Jurji Zeidan (1924–25), the students also presented their case in person to the governor of Mount Lebanon, the consuls of England, the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and Russia, as well as other local missionaries and teachers in Beirut (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 60). In the petitions, the students structured their appeals to the SPC administration around a number of grievances, including but not limited to Lewis' abrupt dismissal from the college. Their complaints, some of which have been preserved as a single Arabic-language document in the American University of Beirut archives, are framed as defenses of Lewis and the remaining faculty (whose resignations they anticipated) and concerns about the value of their diplomas and certification to practice medicine in the Ottoman Empire (see translations of the petitions published in Jeha, 2004, pp. 55–70).¹²

The group requested a meeting with the administration on December 4, and in presenting this request, they appealed to what they assumed was a shared concern for the medical school's *ثبوتها وتسقوطها* or "stability and potential downfall" ("To the Dean," 1882). Reflecting a keen rhetorical awareness, the students framed themselves as thoughtful and rational in their decision to strike: They introduced the first full petition, presented to the administration on Tuesday, December 5, with the qualification that they had "hope [the SPC administrators] will not consider [the strike] as the result of passion and folly, but of reflection and consideration, albeit the exciting cause is sudden" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 55). Describing the relationship between the college and the students as a contract or promise that had been broken, the students wrote in the same petition that "we came to study medicine in your college under certain professors and defined conditions ... and in as

11 Jeha (2004) provided a useful chronological account of the petitions. The full texts of these petitions have been translated in the English edition of his book, and it is because of the clarity of presentation that I have chosen to rely primarily on these translations rather than the translations included in the President's Annual Report of 1882–83, which did not reprint the whole series of petitions. A few of the petitions were translated from Arabic to English by Yahia Hamadeh on my behalf; not all of the original petitions were available in the archives. When the original petition is one that I worked with in the archives in Arabic, I present Arabic alongside the English translation.

12 As depicted in Jeha (2004), on December 5, the students presented two separate petitions: One made several educational requests related to the Turkish government's examination requirements for certification to practice medicine, which was at odds with SPC's curriculum and language of instruction. This first petition also discussed Dr. Lewis' dismissal. The second was focused entirely on the dismissal of Dr. Lewis. Later petitions also brought up the problems with the examination and SPC curriculum in tandem with Lewis' dismissal, though they focused more on the latter than the former (see Jeha, 2004, pp. 53–70).

much as the bond between us and you is those conditions and some of them are now wanting, we have come to fear that they will all fail” (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 55). Continuing, the students argued that they

entered on condition that our Professors should be Doctors Van Dyck, Wortabet, Post, Lewis, Brigstocke, and William Van Dyck. This agreement has also been broken in a very strange manner, the like of which has not been heard of, by the removal of one of them from the College, notwithstanding that we need him. Can we be blamed if we fear greater trouble than this? (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 55)

In another petition submitted the same day, the students articulated the educational promise held by SPC as a right they were entitled to—in “not allow[ing the students] to know of what was coming before [they] entered” their studies at the beginning of the academic year, they characterized the college’s decision to let Lewis go as one that has “caus[ed]” them “injuries” (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 56). The students apparently sought to demonstrate through their petitions that they shared the same concern for SPC’s success in the region as the administration surely did. They suggested that the removal of one of their professors pointed toward an instability within the school that would affect everyone’s collective progress and success. They also saw the situation as clearly unjust. As I discuss in Chapter 3, SPC students received a decidedly rhetorical education, one that emphasized linguistic, literary, and oratorical skills in multiple languages, and this education would have prepared the striking students to constitute themselves through the petitions as representative of SPC’s model student-citizen: critical, autonomous, and empowered to speak. Perhaps because SPC promoted these values in its curriculum, the students felt authorized to adopt this seemingly American identity in the petitions.

Although Lewis’ resignation was ostensibly based on his public support for Darwin’s theory of evolution, the students never expressed in the petitions a concern over Lewis’ beliefs. Rather, the petition that expressly protested Lewis’ dismissal, which was submitted at the beginning of the strike, was framed as a defense of his character, a defense that would have resonated with what the students had learned in the (American) Protestant chapel services on campus, which they were required to attend regardless of their religious sect or beliefs. As in the petitions in which the students articulated their individual rights to SPC’s promise of an American education, the students appealed in their defenses of Lewis to what they believed the administration would value. They defended Lewis based on their understanding of the

college's emphasis on moral and Christian conduct, as well as its commitment to just treatment for all.¹³ Specifically, the students characterized Lewis as "pious and excellent" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 56). They argued that no one would believe the administration's charge against Lewis of "setting forth Darwin's infidel opinions in the last annual address" if they "underst[oo]d his speech and [knew] his Christian deportment and upright example and piety" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 56). What's more, they pointed out, Lewis' service as "President of the religious society and leader in good works" contradicted the administration's accusation against him (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 56).

After several unfruitful exchanges with the SPC faculty and administrators, as well as with political representatives and other local community members, the students seemed disillusioned by what they perceived to be a gap between the values espoused by SPC and its actions. As a result, the rhetoric of the petitions changed. As the situation escalated and it became clear that Lewis would not be reinstated, the students presented a complaint targeted at President Bliss and Post to the local BOM on December 16. Cornelius Van Dyck was responsible for reading the complaints of the students at the BOM meeting that evening. As Zeidan explained later, while he and the rest of the students "walk[ed] around the school waiting for the end of the session," Van Dyck was asked to read the petition, "given his good knowledge of Arabic. As soon as he started reading, a member of the audience asked that he be silenced because he regarded the subject as personal defamation" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 64). Van Dyck left the room, and Zeidan reported that he "saw [Van Dyck] riding away in his carriage and anger was clear on his face" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 65). The remaining members of the BOM demanded that the students rescind their names from the offending petition or be expelled. There could be no clearer message that the students' assumed "right" to free speech and other benefits afforded to American citizens were not theirs to assert.

Two days later, coinciding with the Van Dycks' resignations, the college administration posted an announcement in response to the students' petition in front of College Hall, located at the center of SPC's campus. Instead of addressing the students' concerns about their education or their professors, the announcement stated that the offending students were to be suspended for one month if they did not sign a redaction of the petition (Jeha, 2004, p. 65). This response—similar to what students would receive in the 1909 protest

13 At the time, there were very few, if any, Muslims enrolled at the college, so it is tempting but inappropriate to analyze the students' rhetorical practices here in light of Islamic principles such as *amanah* (amanah, or "upholding and fulfilling trusts") (see Tamara Issak & Lana Oweidat, 2023). While Islamic principles have undoubtedly influenced Arab culture generally, the students at SPC at the time would have identified more closely with Western and Christian values.

discussed later in this chapter—attempted to disempower the students. It was hardly the fair and balanced response that the students had hoped to receive and believed they would get as they performed their role as cultural citizens. The announcement only strengthened the resolve and frustration of the protesting students. Only three medical students signed, and the remaining students maintained the strike.

In their final petition, composed several weeks after the first, the students indicted SPC faculty, administration, and the local BOM for refusing to fully respond to their complaints or reconsider the decision regarding Lewis (Jeha, 2004, pp. 66–68). While the students' rhetoric in previous petitions purposefully characterized America and its affiliated values in a positive light, this final petition marked a turning point in the students' rhetorical representation of the America they imagined. Instead of portraying America as an ally in this petition, the students identified America, with its affiliated colonial epistemology, as an entity that had failed them and was, apparently, a fiction. In this final petition is seen a heightened sense of agency based in students' shared Arab, rather than American, identity.

The students' indictment in this final petition referred explicitly to the false promise of America that Syrian students and the local community had assumed in their relations with SPC. They wrote that

it never occurred to the minds in Syria or in the Syrian Protestant College that noble people like you who belong to the American land of freedom would issue judgments without considering the related evidence. You refused to listen to students whose acts did not convey any signs of rashness and who claimed their just rights Sirs, we thought that presenting our requests to noble, pious American people who came to serve our countries in the name of the good and the right would assure us about all that we are struggling for. (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 67)

In this petition, more than in any other, the students composed a rhetorical distance that separated their inherited identity from the American cultural citizenship they had previously performed. Indeed, the students identified themselves in terms of a specifically *Syrian* identity: Those who claimed this identity, according to the students, had imagined America to be a "land of freedom," full of "noble, pious ... people." Americans, in the Syrian imagination and as represented through SPC until the 1882 crisis, were a people who would recognize and uphold "the good and the right." But here the students articulated clearly that such a construction was false.

The students substantiated their argument in the same petition by stating that their complaints “[had] been found reasonable by natives and foreigners” alike (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 67). Here, the students highlighted that SPC had acted not only against American values, but also against values that were shared by the local Arab community, as well as other “foreigners,” perhaps referencing the British missionary and several American teachers in the local community with whom the students consulted during the protest (Jeha, 2004, pp. 60 and 67). At the end of the petition, the students noted that three of their classmates had signed the written apology. Identifying these students as “traitors,” the group pointedly asked its audience, “Do you think all the Arab medical students are like [the students who signed the apology]?” (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 68). In posing this question, the students asserted a collective Arab identity, distancing themselves from the American cultural citizenship they had previously assumed.

In this final petition, in *disidentifying* with the college—and thus *disidentifying* with America and the colonial epistemology that exposed them to unjust treatment—the students inscribed themselves as the subjects, rather than the objects, of the conflict and thus their education. This petition represents the moment when students learned the limits of literate action for attaining cultural citizenship within the college as they realized that the college was grounded upon an exclusionary colonial mentality, no matter how well they expressed themselves in line with this mentality. Indeed, in describing their American education as a promise that had been denied to them and in subsequently rejecting the institution's (assumed) desire that they pursue American cultural citizenship or belonging, the students identified and rejected the deeper ethnocentric attitude that laid at the heart of the conflict and, perhaps, at the heart of American identity. In other words, in rejecting the false promise of citizenship—in refusing to pursue the “American dream”—the students ultimately exposed the social inequality that was and still is promoted and maintained within American nationalist discourse, then as much as now. Instead, the students asserted a collective Arab nationalist identity that rhetorically reasserted their agency in the face of colonialism.

Resolving a Failed American Revolution

The resolution of the crisis, dissatisfactory for all, illuminates the complicated commitments of the American college in the late 19th century, torn between colonial epistemology and local needs and desires. By the end of the 1882–1883 academic year, SPC would lose five of six of its medical faculty when it

refused to reinstate Lewis.¹⁴ The student “rebellion” complicated the affair, as the students involved comprised nearly a third of all the students enrolled at SPC at the time. It was in the best interests of the college to keep its medical students; if SPC were to lose the whole cohort—voluntarily or through expulsion—as well as its faculty, SPC would be forced to close the medical department. It would be difficult for SPC to convince students to remain if it could not satisfy their demands and guarantee that they had enough faculty to cover the curriculum. At the same time, the local BOM did not want to send a message to students, stakeholders, or the surrounding community that SPC would cave to local (Arab) pressure. By the time the students sent their final appeal to the college administrators, SPC had already chosen a course of action that would assert the superiority of the American administrators, maintain distance between local and foreign stakeholders, and, ultimately, uphold the college’s distinctly American (colonial) identity.

When the students continued their strike, SPC administrators were both surprised and worried. Wortabet, the last remaining member of the medical faculty who did not resign until March 1883, was asked to visit the local students and convince them to sign a “clarification” statement rather than an apology, but the majority of students refused (Jeha, 2004, pp. 74–78). After Christmas break, SPC managed to find temporary faculty to cover the medical school’s courses, and by the end of the academic year, a majority of the striking students—31 out of 50—signed an apology and returned to their studies.

When confronted by its own students and faculty, the college’s attempts to resolve the 1882 crisis forced it to come to terms with tensions that already existed between its foreign and local constituents. SPC’s decisions during this moment of crisis foregrounded and affirmed the college’s position as a foreign entity, as well as its representation of America in the region. SPC ultimately chose a colonial path that privileged its foreign faculty over locally born, a trend that would continue for the next 40 years. The resignations of the Arabic-speaking medical faculty, too, paved the way for English to become the language of instruction throughout the college.¹⁵ Although, as I discuss in

14 John Wortabet was the last of the medical faculty to resign in March 1883. Upon Wortabet’s retirement, David Stuart Dodge, the secretary of SPC’s Board of Trustees in New York, wrote to Daniel Bliss (apparently in reply to a letter from Bliss that hasn’t been located): “What a blessing to be rid of the last of that half-hearted, half-educated (in the best sense), unwilling, un-American, missionary line of Professors” (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 90).

15 The Collegiate and Preparatory Departments agreed to use English as the language of instruction beginning in 1880, but the Medical Department did not officially make the switch until 1887 (*Annual Reports*).

Chapter 3, multiple languages remained central to SPC's curriculum after the crisis, the shift from Arabic to English also established a clear connection between English-language literacy and American nationalism for the local population. Additionally, the crisis reveals that there was disagreement about what it meant to be Protestant, which was closely affiliated with American national identity: Following the crisis, the Board of Trustees required all faculty to sign its Declaration of Principles, a document that highlighted the religious mission of the college and outlined a moral code that all faculty were expected to follow (Jeha, 2004, p. 101).¹⁶ And finally, SPC chose to assert a single-minded authority over its students, even when confronted with well-reasoned arguments grounded in the same American values that the college espoused in principle.

According to Jurji Zeidan, whose memoir accounts for his role as president of the protesting student group, the students felt empowered to speak and write in protest specifically because of the American values espoused by the college, among which he included critical thought, freedom of speech, independence, and human rights (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 65).¹⁷ In other words, according to Zeidan, the students' sense of empowerment, with which they questioned SPC through literate action, was made possible thanks to the literacy education they had been introduced to at SPC.¹⁸ Zeidan characterized the college faculty's actions during the crisis as driven by "racial discrimination and ... scorn for Arabs" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 65). The faculty's response to the crisis, according to Zeidan, suggested that "they ... want[ed] to prohibit [the students] from complaining against their American professors, who themselves had taught personal freedom and moral courage" (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 65). Zeidan's account highlights the contradictions and confusion experienced by students as they attempted to draw upon an imagined America in their protest but were unexpectedly met with resistance

16 Local faculty, none of whom were (or would become) professorial-rank faculty, were not required to sign the declaration but were required to be Protestant and to be supporters of the mission of the College (Jeha, 2004, p. 101).

17 At the time of the strike, Zeidan was a second-year student in the medical department at SPC (Jeha, 2004). After he was expelled and refused to sign an apology, he and another expelled student went to Egypt to continue their studies in medicine. However, they were unsuccessful, and Zeidan remained in Egypt (Jeha, 2004, pp. 75 and 77). There, he became a prolific writer of history, literature, and autobiography; he is well-known today as the author of 23 novels, the founder of the journal *Al-Hilal*, and an early voice of Arab nationalism, or النهضة (*al-Nahda*, which translates to "the renaissance" or "the awakening," which is discussed in Chapter 5).

18 By naming these values "American," I do not mean to suggest that these values can only be attributed to America. However, Zeidan specifically attributed the students' understanding and deployment of these values to the American education provided by SPC.

by those who had constructed that image. Such experiences of confusion and, undoubtedly, disappointment can help begin to reveal the implications of educators' promises for those for whom success or failure is most at stake.

Beyond Zeidan's account, the petitions themselves can be understood as a rhetorical rendering of the epistemological conflicts that students experienced throughout their literacy education at SPC. The students deployed this understanding of America strategically in an effort to persuade the American faculty and administrators to reinstate Lewis. Examining these students' strategies can help shed light on the epistemological conflicts that students experience, today and in the past, when they are asked to perform as American cultural citizens in and through literacy.

Initially, the petitions represented America and American colonial epistemology in a positive light, which underlines students' understanding of American nationalist rhetoric that they learned through their literacy education. At the same time, the early petitions articulated the students' disappointment in what they perceived to be SPC's failure to provide an American education—an education that matched the values it espoused—and which they saw as embodied by faculty such as Lewis, the Van Dycks, and Wortabet. In one early petition, the students wrote, “We did not come to the College save to study with distinguished professors whom we know, and the College to us is these professors” (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 56). Importantly, these faculty were educated in the United States but were tied through language and experience to the local community. The students' protest, therefore, can be understood as a response to the loss of faculty whose perspectives married the local and the global in their pedagogical approaches, which for students represented what they might call an “ideal” American education.

The students' defense of Lewis in these petitions illustrated a belief among the students that the college valued fairness, equity, and moral (Christian) behavior—values tied to American conceptions of citizenship. The students assumed that the American education at SPC, which they espoused in their own rhetorical practices, would be valued. The students believed that they had the *right* to speak out about a perceived injustice specifically because the right to free speech was fundamental to the American identity they had learned to imitate in and through their literacy education. In adopting the behaviors and actions of American citizenship and its associated values in their rhetoric, the protesting students expected SPC to reflect the same values and behavior in its actions toward its faculty, as well as in its interactions with students. The problem, of course, was that the college's espoused values were grounded upon a colonial epistemology that would always assert the superiority of the college's American administrators and faculty over local ways of knowing.

In effect, in critiquing the administration, the striking students rhetorically constituted themselves according to what they imagined to be SPC's "ideal" student body—a body that acts and speaks according to the American values embedded within the school's curricular and extracurricular requirements. As the students were to learn, however, SPC administration did not respond favorably to this application of students' literacy education. Three years later, Ya'qub Sarruf and Faris Nimr, who were themselves Syrian graduates of and former medical instructors at SPC but who were now the editors of *al-Muqtataf*—the same journal that originally published Lewis's offending speech—would write what Makdisi (2010) characterized as a "scathing article about the college" (p. 68). In the article, Sarruf and Nimr criticized SPC for abandoning its original mission, which was "to turn over the college to local hands as soon as the nationals of [Syria] had proved themselves qualified" (Makdisi, 2010, p. 68). As Makdisi (2010) explained, the editors "lamented" in the article "that the ... American professors who remained at the college after the Darwin affair had decided that the college was 'American through and through'" (as cited in Makdisi, 2010, pp. 68–69).

As can be seen from the petitions as well as later accounts of the 1882 crisis, the SPC medical students addressed their audiences directly, establishing a clear sense of agency in relation to their rights as students and also in articulating what they saw as an injustice. They demanded answers, frustrated by a lack of transparency on the part of the administration. It was the absence of clarity or dialogue—values that the students learned through their education at SPC were American and should therefore be shared by the institution—that justified, in their view, the continuation of the strike. As the crisis deepened, the students' rhetoric moved away from the model-citizen script with which they had begun the protest. The shift in rhetoric suggests students' turn to their own local values and beliefs when their American appeals failed. This departure is key to understanding how and why promises made by literacy educators have such high stakes: In coming to terms with the illusion that American education provides equal access and equal opportunity, students may find the promises of social mobility and social justice that are held as an ideal of American literacy education to be disingenuous.

Studying the exchanges between students and faculty and the dissatisfying resolution of the crisis helps expose the reality that literacy education does not necessarily produce an active or engaged citizenry. We can see in this case competing specters of America and conflicting desires for an American literacy education—as represented in and through SPC—at work in Syria and the region more generally in the late 19th century. These contradictory definitions and desires, which represent larger epistemological conflicts at work,

created a simultaneous sense of belonging and exclusion. As will be seen in the next section, which focuses on a larger student protest at SPC in 1909, these epistemological conflicts grew stronger as the college grew and as the geopolitics of the region shifted.

“This Is No Summer Cloud ... ”: The 1909 Muslim Controversy

Twenty-seven years after the Lewis Affair, during the Spring 1909 semester, students at SPC once again organized to protest college policy during a period of crisis for the college that became known as the “Muslim Controversy.” In this part of the chapter, I present the background for the crisis and details of the crisis itself, followed by an analysis of the internal and public documents surrounding the crisis, including those authored by SPC students, SPC faculty and administrators, and community members. Many of those voices were represented in newspaper articles published throughout the region, which form the basis for this analysis. The written exchanges about the 1909 crisis illustrate how SPC students and the local community articulated and negotiated conflicts about what the American college and the education it provided meant, or should mean, to the region. Such conflicts were, at their heart, epistemological, and local discourse undoubtedly reflects local concerns about the impact of Western colonial epistemology and its attendant religious ideology on the region. Just as we saw in the 1882 crisis, SPC students’ literate action again called into question what it meant to “belong” to SPC or whether they could, in fact, claim the cultural citizenship that their literacy education seemed to promise was available to them. The 1909 crisis, however, brought a protracted debate among students and community members around whether the risk that the college’s colonial and Christianizing mission presented for Muslim and Jewish students was worth the potential reward of acquiring a Western education. This part of the chapter sheds light on the kinds of epistemological and ideological conflicts that many historically underrepresented students experience in literacy classrooms today.

To understand the crisis, it is necessary to first understand the larger context in which it arrived. The year of 1908 was a revolutionary year in the Ottoman Empire, as the Young Turks reversed Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s suspension of the 1876 Ottoman constitution and reinstated the Parliament, effectively ending the Sultan’s power after 33 years. “Liberty, equality, and fraternity”—key words in the 1876 constitution inspired by the French Revolution—became the motto for the Young Turks’ July 1908 revolution. The period marked, for many throughout the Empire including in Syria, the promise of a new era and the potential of democracy.

At around the same time as the Young Turks succeeded in overturning the monarchy, several articles were published in Beirut and Cairo openly criticizing the religious requirements at SPC. In "The Moslems in the American College, Beirut" (1909), the Egyptian newspaper *Moweyid* (المؤيد or *The Advocate*) reported that Suleiman Effendi Bustani, representative for Beirut in the Parliament, had met with the presidents of the foreign schools in the city, including the Université Saint-Joseph (USJ, the French Jesuit university which opened in 1875) and SPC, urging them to drop the religious requirements for non-Christian students. USJ's decision to follow Bustani's request earned praise from various newspaper editors and provided ammunition for the same as they criticized SPC's insistence on maintaining its requirement.

Presumably in response to these articles and the changing mood of the region, Muslim and Jewish parents began requesting that their children be exempted from the religious requirement at SPC. These requests were denied by the SPC administration (Moore, 1909a). During the 1908–1909 academic year, 128 Muslim and 88 Jewish students were enrolled out of 876 total students, making up approximately 15 percent of the student body (see Appendix A for demographic details). In the fall 1908 semester, apparently under the advisement of community groups such as the Society for Religious Liberty, the Muslim students made a number of requests of the SPC administration to form sponsored groups based on their religious identity.¹⁹ Specifically, Muslim students first appealed to the faculty requesting permission to form a Muslim union. This request was denied on the grounds that no religious organizations besides the YMCA were allowed on campus. Students next requested to form a "somewhat select" literary society, which they said would be focused on the study of Islamic literature, but which would be open to anyone—according to Professor Franklin Moore (1909a), "this was smothered in committee" (p. 9). The students also requested that a student representative be allowed to "conduct pourparlors," or discussions, regularly with the SPC administration, but this was denied "seeing that to recognize a representative was tantamount to organizing for them a society, a matter already declined" (Moore, 1909a, p. 9; see also Mahmoud Haddad, 2002). According to Moore (1909a), "During all this time they frequented the mosques of the city, and many speeches were made by students and by Moslems of the city" (p. 9). Finally, the Muslim students requested permission to attend mosque for prayers. At last, this final request was approved (B. S. Anderson, 2011, p. 85; Moore, 1909a).

19 See "The Beirut College and Islam" (A. of the Syrian College, 1909) for specific mention of the Society for Religious Liberty and Moore (1909a, pp. 8–10) for reference to a committee of Muslims in Beirut.

With this series of requests behind them, SPC administrators likely believed they had sufficiently addressed the non-Christian students' demands while upholding the mission of the college. In the college's annual report, President Howard Bliss retrospectively noted that, "With a Constitution proclaiming Islam as the religion of the State and at the same time pronouncing that there was to be everywhere liberty in religious belief it is small occasion for wonder that the spirit of eager restlessness has entered the educational institutions of the Empire" (*Annual Reports*, 1909, p. 4). Indeed, the students' requests during fall 1908 demonstrate a growing awareness of, and response to, the sociopolitical context surrounding SPC. As they proceeded with high stakes requests to honor their religious identities, students developed an awareness and frustration at being denied the religious freedom presumably promised to them by the Empire, and which they believed was foundational to American society. This set the stage for SPC's next crisis, the 1909 "Muslim Controversy."

The Sermon and the Storm

In January 1909, shortly after the beginning of the spring 1909 semester, a sermon was given by a missionary named James H. Nicol, who was visiting SPC from Tripoli, a city in northern Lebanon. All SPC students were required to attend Sunday chapel services during which sermons were given. It was reported that Nicol said during the sermon that:

We the Christians are surrounded with great walls of enemies, the Moslems and others. They prevent us from spreading the true call and await the opportunity to devour us. It is our business then, our sacred duty to break down these walls and tread upon them These obstacles to our faith and to our religion are doomed if we will only fight them as we should. (Nickoley, 1909)²⁰

20 It is important to point out that faculty did not agree with students' interpretation of Nicol's sermon. The summary presented here by Edward Nickoley, an SPC professor who also served as the acting president while Howard Bliss was in the US, was presented in a letter to Bliss while he was out of the country. Nickoley's purpose in the letter was to defend Nicol's speech, writing that "there was not the slightest implication of hostility or animus in the address or in any of the talks of the week." Professor Franklin Moore, too, in a speech to faculty on January 25, 1909, suggested that the students misrepresented Nicol's address—Moore (1909a) called it "a malignantly false interpretation of portions of the address." Professor William Hall's summary of the event, as well as Bliss' April 1909 letter to parents, also suggest that Nicol was misunderstood (Hall, 1909; H. Bliss, 1909a).

Nicol's sermon provoked an immediate response from the students, as it suggested that members of the Muslim population—which comprised a majority of the Ottoman Empire—were “enemies” of the Christian missionaries. And, if the report was true, Nicol seemed to be sending a message to his audience that Christians were called by God to “fight” these groups. Given this message, it is no wonder that within the week, 98 students had signed a petition protesting the requirement of Christian religious services and more than 200 refused to attend chapel services (Moore, 1909a, p. 7). In an action reminiscent of the 1882 crisis, the faculty responded to the petition by posting the college's policy on religious instruction in both Arabic and English on a bulletin board in the library. The policy, which was also published annually in the College catalogue, read,

Morning and evening prayers are held daily in the College. Each Sunday, there is a church service in the morning, and a Bible school in the afternoon, with classes under the care of various professors and instructors. All resident students are required to attend all these services, except that resident medical and pharmaceutical students are required to attend only evening prayers and Sunday morning church. Non-resident commercial, collegiate, and preparatory students are required to attend only morning and evening prayers, and non-resident medical and pharmaceutical students only evening prayers. There is a Sunday evening service for the Preparatory Department in Daniel Bliss Hall, attendance on which is voluntary for students of all other departments. (H. Bliss, 1909a)

Moore (1909a) later reported in a speech to the faculty that students reacted negatively to the administration's posting and took quick action:

During the day or two following, several regrettable incidents occurred, each one inevitable by itself, and the students, roused by an outburst in the opinion of the city, irritated by the public delivery of the document, on a bulletin board, and by the regrettable incidents mentioned, finally engaged in a sacred oath on the Koran, swearing never again to attend services or Bible classes under compulsion, and swearing further not to leave the College if expelled. (p. 10)

In the same speech, given about two weeks after Nicol's sermon, Moore reported that the students had almost immediately begun telling their side of

the story outside the walls of the college, even communicating with government officials. Moore (1909a) explained that the students

... fired a powerful battery; they saw the Governor General; they telegraphed their case to the American Ambassador, to the Deputies in Parliament representing Beirut, to the Ministry of the Interior, whose present chief is said to be the leading man in the Party of Progress, and whose first utterance on this subject will be significant; and they telegraphed a long message to the Sultan direct, not as the Monarch of the Empire, but as the Caliph of the Moslem world. (p. 11)

Moore's overview of the actions taken by the students so quickly after the offending sermon must have caused anxiety among the audience of college faculty and brought to the fore how serious the crisis really was. Compounding the situation, newspapers in Beirut and Cairo became embroiled in the controversy: Editors, community members, and current and former students weighed in, siding with and against SPC. More than 60 articles related to the crisis were published in at least 15 regional newspapers between January and October 1909.²¹ Thus, a student strike—and a college crisis—began.

While the strike was underway, the students behaved perfectly in all other contexts, demonstrating not only their own self-respect and dignity, but also that they understood well what it took to “belong” in the American college. In his account of the strike, Moore (1909a) remarked that the students were extremely well-behaved, noting that they “scrupulously observe every other regulation. They do their academic duties, up to this moment, with carefulness and with manifest good-will. They protest their love for the College. They do not wish to go” (p. 6). The controversy arose while President Howard Bliss was out of the country on a visit to the US, so the faculty were left to contain the strike as best they could without their president. They chose not to take any drastic action until he returned in late February 1909. In a letter to the Board of Trustees describing the crisis, Howard Bliss (1909b) noted the protesting students' admirable behavior, writing that upon his returned to Beirut, he

received a very warm welcome Among those who met me at the steamer was a boatload full of Moslem students who had been most active in connection with resisting the regulations of

21 The newspaper articles related to the “Muslim Crisis” are preserved together as a collection in the AUB Jafet Library archives. All the newspaper articles were written originally in Arabic, but the articles preserved in the archives are only preserved as translations in English (the original Arabic articles are not preserved in the archives). According to B. S. Anderson (2011), Professor Harvey Porter translated the articles himself (p. 211n149).

the College relating to religious exercises. This action of theirs was indicative of their desire to show their loyalty to the College All the students involved have been, almost without exception, scrupulously careful in matters of conduct and attention to their class duties.

As will be seen in the next sections, the students' behavior in front of the American faculty and administrators who had the power to change the college policy contrasted with the Arabic-language discussions among students and the local community. In other words, students seemed to understand that the cultural citizenship that was implicitly promised by the college required adopting and adapting to American expectations for the role they should occupy.

There is evidence that the SPC faculty took the student protest seriously, which contrasts with the faculty's response to students during the 1882 controversy. In a summary of the strike in a letter to Bliss on February 5, 1909, Moore (1909b) wrote, "This whole issue may be a mere 'summer cloud' as some of the Syria Mission freely proclaimed at one of our meetings in conference with them. If so, then heaven help us in the time of a winter storm." After outlining what he saw as the basis of the conflict in some detail, however, Moore urged the President to return to Syria at his earliest convenience, warning, "This is no summer cloud; it is not child's play."

In the next three sections, I analyze the rhetorics deployed by students, faculty, and community members during this controversy. Specifically, stakeholders during the controversy deployed rhetorics of Muslim identification and rhetorics of protest against Western colonial epistemology as they debated the religious requirement at SPC. These debates exposed key ideological conflicts that ran to the heart of SPC's colonial presence in Beirut. These conflicts illustrate the difficult choices faced by the local population as they weighed the opportunities for mobility offered by the college against the challenge that the college posed to their religious and ethnic identities. Similar debates continue to resonate in literacy education today. Current and former SPC students and the local community, the archives show, engaged rhetorically in the questions underlying the conflict; this deep engagement highlights the agency held by local populations and deployed through literate action, even in the face of colonial epistemology.

Rhetorics of Muslim Unification and Identity

During the 1909 crisis, the students called upon a rhetoric of Muslim identification and unity, which was sometimes, but not always, also anti-Western or

anti-American. As I elaborate in Chapter 2 and as Masters (2013) discussed extensively, the relationship between the Arab population in Syria and the Ottoman Empire was a complicated one. Like most of the Arab population, students tended to support the Empire after the 1908 revolution because of the Young Turks' perceived potential to exert power in support of the Muslim population. Although they identified ethnically as Arabs, distinct from their Turkish, Greek, and Persian counterparts, most of the local population identified readily as Ottoman subjects.²² Even as the Empire faced challenges from outside, few Arabs expressed a desire to form a separate Arab state. This is likely because, until the Empire began to exert its power through linguistic and legal restrictions more forcefully in the face of its dissolution, the local population was largely allowed to govern itself and speak Arabic. Until the Empire's dissolution during World War I, most of the Empire's subjects perceived the Empire as valuable in the sense that it could speak for and preserve the interests of Muslims.

In the articles published during the crisis in magazines circulated throughout the region (Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo), students and community members appealed to Arab nationalism, Muslim unity, and resistance to the West or to America. These discussions, held amongst each other rather than in dialogue with the Americans, revealed tensions between the expected behavior and literate action of SPC students and the Muslim and Arab identity that was integral to this group of students' belonging in the region. The writers worked to persuade readers to accept and understand the student protest.²³ Although they did not use the term *amanah* (أمانة, or "upholding and fulfilling trusts"), the writers seemed to rely on this shared Islamic principle, which "requires Muslims to speak up against any injustice" (Issak & Oweidat, 2023, p. 187).

One writer, El-Ghali (1909), called upon readers' sense of Arab nationalism and shared Muslim identity to defend the students' perspective. He argued that the dispute was justified because of the new Ottoman government's stance on religious liberty, writing that "religious liberty demands that man should be free in his belief and worship without being compelled to

22 At least two articles referenced a secret student society called the "Society of Ottoman Students Union"—see "The College in Beirut and Islam" (1909) and *Himmet* (1909).

23 Khalidi (1991a) discussed the role of newspapers in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo in the rise of Arab nationalism, writing, "... the newspaper that was arguably the most influential voice of the Arab movement, *al-Mufid*, was published in Beirut (its closest rival in this respect was *al-Muqtabas* in Damascus) Other Beirut Arabist papers included *al-Ittihad*, *al-'uthmani*, *al-Haqiqa*, and *al-Iqbal*. It seems that most Beirut papers were Arabist and that this city had more Arabist newspapers than any other in *bilad al-sham*" (pp. 55–56).

attend the worship of another or learn his doctrines." An anonymous author, writing a month later in the same magazine, argued against the presence of "foreigners" in the Ottoman Empire, suggesting that writers who defended the college were unpatriotic (*The College and the Moslem Students*, 1909).

Other writers took a different approach, suggesting that the best solution would be for Muslims to create a university of their own instead of relying on SPC for higher education. For example, Safar Towfik (1909) of Egypt called on readers to consider establishing their own university rather than depending on foreigners to grant religious freedom. Similarly, Mahmoud 'Asmet (1909) called on "Egyptian Moslems" to give money, presumably for the establishment of a new college to "unify the course of instruction" and ultimately release their children from dependence on SPC for their education.²⁴

These writers' appeals to Arab nationalism and resistance to the West were, more often than not, also tied up with appeals to the Muslim identity and Islamic principles they shared with sympathetic readers. One former student who wrote a number of articles critical of SPC during the course of the crisis, Mohammed Zeki (1909), addressed a letter to the "Honored Fathers" of Muslim students. Zeki opened the letter by appealing to the readers' shared Muslim identity, writing,

... your sons (God preserve them) comprehended the matter and perceived the danger and refused to attend church where they had heard themselves despised and scorned, morning and evening. Are you aware what your sons do and what of toils and troubles they suffer? Your sons in that college (I refer only to Moslems) who are sent for the sole purpose of picking the fruits of knowledge not of preaching (which is one of the duties of a religious school) against their will, have raised complaints to heaven in supplication for help but there was no one to help, and they groan but there is none to have mercy.²⁵

An anonymous writer for the *Ittehad* (الاتحاد or *The Union*) also appealed to Muslim identity, arguing that Islam "requires us to declare also that it is unlawful for any Moslem to place his child in the American College ... as long as this is its policy" ("The American College," 1909). The implication

24 These different stances were typical of Muslim discourse surrounding the topic of non-Muslim education in Syria at the time; see M. Haddad's (2002) discussion of four different attitudes surrounding foreign education during the first half of the 20th century (p. 257).

25 Also see the article "In Lighter Vein" (1909) for an imagined conversation between the SPC president and students, which presented the conversation as one of strength and unity rather than division.

in this article and in others is that SPC was a space in which Muslims were unwelcome.

Similarly, in an article published in late February in *Ittehad* (الاتحاد or *The Union*), a student writer named Himmet (1909b), one of the presumed leaders of the movement, expressed strong conviction that “they”—those who urged the students to desist in their protest—underestimated the unity binding the Muslim students together.²⁶ Like Zeki (1909), Himmet (1909b) appealed to a broader Muslim readership in his rhetoric. Unlike Zeki (1909), however, Himmet’s (1909b) rhetoric was less critical of the college, expressing a conviction that the college faculty would act on the matter wisely and highlighting his authority to speak from his perspective as a student:

They say [emphasis added] that the college will take every means to bring the Christian students to support it in case of need against the Moslem students, not understanding that the Faculty will employ only the most honorable means to defend its rights and that they are superior to measures causing any such factions among their sons. *They say* [emphasis added] that the president of the college, who has recently returned from America, will use every means to frighten the students and induce them to break their oath through fear of punishment, not realizing that the students will not turn from anything they have sworn to as long as any power or device lies in their hands and that they will lose worldly good but will not lose their honor and its glory.

In this article, alongside another article by Himmet (1909a) published a week prior, Himmet (1909b) suggested that, from his perspective as a student, he did not think it would be productive to exacerbate tensions between the protesting students and the college administrators.²⁷ He threaded the needle, so to speak, between legitimizing the students’ protest as a member of it, while also insisting on the value of the college for the local community. He strategically used his writing to criticize those who sought to increase the tension in other publications.

In an article titled “No Danger to Islam,” Dr. Musa Zakhariya (1909) expressed his support for SPC as an institution and highlighted the unity of Muslims. He suggested, through a series of rhetorical questions, that SPC’s

26 Edward Nickoley (1909), who served as acting president while Howard Bliss was in the US, identified Himmet as one of the leaders of the student movement.

27 In the article published in the same magazine on February 17, 1909, Himmet (1909b) expressed anger at other writers who had spread false rumors that “the honorable faculty of the college has asked for the presence of an American battle ship” in response to the students.

efforts to convert students were relatively innocuous due to the strength of the Muslim faith:

Has any Moslem heard of one of his faith adopting Christianity in the College? Has he seen one entering a church after leaving college? You should have seen him asleep in the college chapel or occupied in reading some novel, and after having seen this, would you say or believe that there was any danger to Moslems in the American college?

Zakhariya (1909) also defended SPC by citing a number of ways in which the school “respects [students’] religious feelings”—specifically, “in the month of Ramadhan [the college] aids students who desire to fast, in every way. It allows them to go to the mosque on Fridays and gives them three holidays for the feast.”²⁸

Other writers echoed Zakhariya’s (1909) downplaying of the effects of SPC’s religious requirement, arguing that Muslim unity would provide protection from proselytization. In an article published in early February, former student Wadi’ Abu Fadhil (1909) summarized the debate as it had appeared in various publications at that point. Like Zakhariya, Abu Fadhil (1909) called upon his readers’ shared Muslim identity to support the college, suggesting that no Muslim students had ever converted to Christianity after attending the college. Most likely referring to Zeki’s (1909) article, Abu Fadhil (1909) criticized the language used in it, arguing that the author had “reiterate[d] the word ‘clergyman’ to induce the reader to suppose that the college contained only clergymen.” Providing evidence similar to Zakhariya (1909), Abu Fadhil (1909) referred to the positive experience he had as a Muslim SPC student, writing that

... the professor of Arabic was constantly urging us to read the *Minar*, a Moslem journal, although he is a Christian professor, and he advised us to read the Koran and the “*Nahij al-Bilagha*,” by Ali ibn Abi Talib, and other distinguished Moslem writers that we might be well grounded in the art of composition.

The reference to *Nahij al-Bilagha* (نهج البلاغة), literally translated to *Peak of Eloquence*) would have been a particularly compelling example for Abu Fadhil’s readers because of the text’s religious value to Muslims and its value as a literary and rhetorical Arabic text (*Nahj al-balagha*, 2024).

28 As mentioned earlier, however, this concession was only recently provided: SPC administration had agreed in the fall 1908 semester to allow students to attend prayer services on Fridays, in response to demands by students and their families.

As we can see from these examples, students and stakeholders held a range of attitudes about the student protest at SPC, particularly related to SPC's place as a Western institution in the Middle East more generally. In spite of the range of perspectives on the issue, writers were unified in identifying themselves as Muslims, and their rhetoric demonstrated a keen awareness of SPC's symbolic power in the region.²⁹ Writers rhetorically constructed a representation of America with both positive and negative connotations, and in doing so they highlighted their shared identity and apparent unity as Muslims. While Nicol's sermon might have been the inciting incident, it was not what motivated the controversy on a deeper level. These writers demonstrate how the sermon brought to the surface underlying epistemological tensions that had circulated within the college since its founding—tensions that prompted the 1882 student protests. The expression of these tensions was perhaps more pronounced in the post-revolutionary context in which the local community was writing in 1909.

As the archives illustrate, current and past SPC students involved in the 1909 protests expressed agency in relation to the college's colonial epistemology, which is an important reminder that coloniality, for all its power, does not actually eliminate the voices of the oppressed. Rather, the expression of agency may emerge in other contexts and, as in this case, in other languages. In and through the Arabic-language publications, students sought to negotiate the cultural citizenship that SPC seemed to offer but which did not include them as Muslims. Current and past SPC students drew on their multiple literacies—importantly, in Arabic rather than in English—to search for a path forward. The writers made appeals to a shared Muslim identity in these publications, which was important for their collective resistance to the American colonial epistemology that was integral to SPC's American identity. As evidenced by current students' use of first names only or pseudonyms, it seems that the writers understood implicitly that the discussions carried out in the

29 Another important figure who weighed in on the conflict at the time was Salafi Sheikh Rashid Rida, a Syrian who was the founder, editor, and primary writer of *al-Manar* (المنار, *The Lighthouse*), a popular periodical published in Cairo between 1838 and 1935 (Nile Green, 2020, in his review of Leor Halevi's *Modern Things on Trial* in the *LA Review of Books*, suggested the periodical was "the most influential magazine in Muslim history"). According to Haddad (2002), Rida visited SPC in early 1909 and met with the Muslim students there. At the time, the students recalled, he urged them to "learn from [the college's approach] and improve ourselves so that we should be more qualified for this achievement than they are today" (p. 259). Because the AUB archival collection of articles surrounding the 1909 crisis did not include Rida's contributions to the conversation, I have not included them in the discussion of other published conversations, which the involved faculty at SPC translated and transcribed. However, Haddad's (2002) account of the protest and Rida's involvement is worth reading, and digitized copies of the 1909 *al-Manar* are available in Arabic online at the Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/Almanar/almanar12/mode/2up>.

Arabic-language publications would not be considered an acceptable use of literacy in English at SPC. As Muslims, they all agreed that SPC's Christian national ideology worked against their own identities. They disagreed about the extent to which this conflict posed a risk and whether the risk was worth the reward of an American education.

Coloniality and the "Idea of America"

SPC faculty were aware of the potential for students and stakeholders to deploy anti-Western rhetoric. They knew that the college was understood by many in the region as a symbol of the West. Additionally, they knew that SPC's policies could be interpreted as conflicting with the freedoms represented in and through the idea of America. Although some faculty sympathized with the students' point of view, the faculty ultimately could not escape the colonial epistemology within which they were enculturated and upon which SPC's existence was justified. We can therefore see negotiation of the crisis unfold as a response to the colonial attitudes held by SPC faculty and administrators; students and stakeholders examined these attitudes in order to engage their audiences in the Arabic-language publications throughout the strike. For the students as much as for the faculty, the negotiation that unfolded was ultimately about who belonged in the American college and what kind of religious and ethnic identity was required in order to access the cultural citizenship held out by SPC.

One of the underlying tensions within the college was related to the hierarchical positioning of American over Syrian faculty at the college. Even before the crisis emerged, writers in regional newspapers had criticized SPC's lack of Syrian faculty and staff holding positions of power in the college. Salim, in September 1908, wrote the following after reviewing the SPC catalogue:

I found that within the names of the faculty, staff, and teachers, that amount to 18 teachers, all are American and none who are Syrian who teach there. There are only 8 [Syrians] who are literature based and all who are assistants to Professors There is Jaber Efendy Doumit, for example, who has not been promoted even though he has attained a school degree in the year 1876, i.e., 32 years ago. And Bouli Efendy Khooly, the "Professor's Assistant," hasn't either, even though he received his degree in 1897, i.e. 11 years ago. At the same time, you find Mansour Efendy Jeradik and Khaled Efendy Thabit both titled as "Professor's Assistant," even though they both attained their degrees in the year 1901, i.e. 7 years ago. I

would think that 32 years of teacher experience, publishing, and practice is enough to allow for a “Professor’s Assistant” to be an actual Professor; perhaps Jaber Efendy’s time spent teaching after attaining a degree is the equivalent of the age of some of the American “Professors” within the College, so what is the reason that the local cannot be a Professor even after 32 years, 11 years, and 7 years? If you were to say that a Teacher every 7 years is promoted to Professor’s Assistant, then Jaber Efendy, after 32 years of teaching, should have been promoted 4.5 times over. So am I to say that 4.5 times (Professor’s Assistant) does not equate one full time Professor?

Salim (1908) pointed to an issue that SPC had hypocritically failed to address since its founding, the question of whether and when Syrian faculty might hold equal status in the college. In January, during his speech to the faculty, Moore (1909a) presented the difficulty of possibly expelling the striking students by force; he noted too the imbalance of power in the college that Salim (1908) pointed out, warning,

It is not that we count only Americans, and count out our magnificent body of Syrian professors and Staff; but when it comes to the application of physical force of the problem of expulsion, *the affair becomes American* [emphasis added]. We 30 Americans, if we think it right, will undertake the task. But will it ever be right? (p. 8)

Moore noted in this speech that, should the college decide to physically remove the protesting students, that show of force would “*become[] American*.” In other words, it seems that Moore and other SPC faculty perceived SPC as occupying a liminal space that positioned them between America and Syria; this liminality allowed the college to conduct its work and attract the local population. But using physical force to remove the local, Muslim students would edge SPC to a decidedly American stance toward the population—a stance that would explicitly assert the college’s power as an American, Christian, and colonial entity, when before this power was asserted somewhat implicitly through the education it provided. Clearly, Moore was uncomfortable with such an explicit display of power, especially as it would reveal an unpleasant truth about American identity.

Moore’s (1909a) question to the faculty—“will [expulsion of the protesting students] ever be right?”—highlights the internal tension, felt by students as well as faculty, between SPC’s soft assertion of power through education and religion

and the potential power that the college could assert by virtue of the colonial epistemology underlying its American identity. The 1882 crisis, too, stemmed from this tension, but by 1909 the college had grown considerably—particularly in terms of the number of Muslim students enrolled—and neither the students nor the faculty were homogenous in their views about what an SPC education meant, what it should mean, and who belonged that space. While many SPC students, as well as many members of the local and regional community, held the college in high regard, they were not ignorant of the xenophobic and colonial attitudes that had formed the basis for the college's founding and its continuing hold on the attitudes of SPC faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders.

In the examples provided by Moore (1909a) and Salim (1908) above, we can see that the hierarchy between Syrians and Americans at SPC troubled not only outsiders but also some members of the faculty. In its report on the strike, SPC's Committee on Discipline (1909) failed to make a clear recommendation for action in relation to the students, but it tied the strike to the internal hierarchy and recommended

... that the old-time distinction between American Professors and Syrian Adj[unct] Professors be stopped; further that the distinction between Americans and Syrians be stopped; that a discrimination be hereafter made not between Americans and Syrians but between Americans and Americans, thereby ... adding to the administrative efficiency of the College.

The Committee's recommendation was ultimately not enacted—it took the college 11 more years to give full voting rights and equal standing to Syrian faculty (B. S. Anderson, 2011, p. 49). But the connection made between the strike and the college's power structure is significant, in that it brings into view the faculty's awareness of, and possible discomfort with, the consequences of maintaining the Syrian/American distinction within the college if they hoped the institution would remain influential within the region.

At the same time, in my review of the archives, I found that, no matter the benevolent intentions of some faculty, xenophobic and colonial attitudes were prevalent and entrenched. Rhetorics of coloniality are reflected in Moore's (1909a) summary of what he saw as the different views of the faculty on the crisis:

To some it is a question of dealing with refractory, rebellious students; to others it is all of that plus a supposed or real threat of mob violence. To others, it is a question of the authority of the Faculty matched against what some would call the

clamor of, and others would call the conscientious demand of, the united opinion of student representatives of two great non-Christian religions within our College. To some it is a question of the technical rights of the Faculty to make and enforce any law, to receive or dismiss any student, as weighed against the harassing, illegal, irritating hectoring of the Faculty and of our loyal student-body by irresponsible and fanatical insiders and outsiders in the city and country.

In Moore's ostensibly representative summary of faculty attitudes, the students' point of view was seen as inherently corrupt. Faculty views on the crisis characterized the students as, at best, disrespectful of authority and "harassing," and—at worst—potentially violent. These views were held even though the students had deliberately remained on their best behavior—displaying their best performance of cultural citizenship—and had merely refused to attend chapel services.

What's more, Moore's (1909a) speech suggests that even as faculty may have tried to understand the students' point of view, they kept returning to the threat to authority that the student protest represented. On the one hand, this insistence on authority could be seen as unsurprising no matter the context, since institutions tend to work to preserve the power of those who already hold it. But on the other hand, Moore's characterization of the faculty's view of the protesting students as "irresponsible and fanatical insiders and outsiders in the city and country" goes further than a relatively mundane insistence on power: Rather, such characterization had the effect of subordinating Muslim and Jewish students collectively, establishing a distinct hierarchy between faculty and students, Christians and non-Christians—even as the faculty were foreign to the place—and even among students themselves, based only on their religious identity. Such characterization, in other words, was grounded in a deeply colonial way of thinking—the very epistemology that students were protesting against.

Looking more closely at the accounts of the controversy reveals how deeply the SPC faculty—even those sympathetic to the students on strike—were entwined in colonial thinking, even as they apparently sought to serve the region by providing an American education. Accounts ranged from hostile to and fearful of the students, as can be seen in the summaries composed by the acting president Nickoley (1909) and Dodge (1909), the president of the SPC Board of Trustees, to sympathetic to the students, as represented in Moore's (1909a) and Professor William Hall's (1909) portrayals. All, however, dismissed the striking students' primary claim that Nicol's address during a required chapel service was offensive. For example, Nickoley's (1909) account focused on the

actions of specific students, including two brothers with the last name of Khairi and a third student with the last name of Himmet (referred to in the previous section), in organizing the student protest. Instead of taking up the students' complaints about Nicol's address, Nickoley blamed the Muslim community—both in and outside of the college—more generally, arguing that “what has happened would have happened anyway ... the Moslems were on the keen lookout for a peg on which to hang the garment on which they and their city friends had been laboring so long and so painstakingly.” Likewise, Hall (1909), whose account belies a fairly sympathetic understanding of the students' point of view, particularly their feeling that requests for religious accommodations on campus had repeatedly been ignored, downplayed the students' interpretations of Nicol's words by calling them the “wildest rumors.” None of the accounts written by faculty acknowledged the anti-Muslim xenophobia promoted by Nicol, and some accounts explicitly highlighted and forwarded colonial epistemology, underlining the prevalence of the problem that the striking students recognized in and through their protest.

Beyond their refusal to acknowledge the address that sparked the strike, faculty accounts of the controversy also reveal deeply held colonial views of the region and its people, particularly Muslims, manifested in fear. In a letter to the college's Board of Trustees, President Howard Bliss (1909b) relayed the many political discussions he had on his way back to Beirut from the US after the strike began; the account reveals just how fearful college leaders were of violence—administrators took “proper precautions,” according to Bliss, to “safeguard[] the property of the College.” Further, upon the President's return to the campus, faculty met with and interviewed each student involved in the strike to ensure that, as Howard Bliss (1909b) explained it, they understood the difference “between a question of conscience and an act of violence ... any student maintaining the defiant attitude would be severely dealt with, while any one showing a spirit of submission would be dealt with leniently.” In an unsigned letter to the American Consul-General (part of which was reproduced in the *Missionary Review of the World* in April³⁰), control of the student strike was attributed to “secret Committees in the city, and perhaps in Egypt” (A Friend, 1909). Clearly, faculty and administrators were distrustful of the Muslim student body, in part because of its connection to the broader Muslim community outside of college walls.

30 *The Missionary Review of the World* was published as a monthly journal from 1888 to 1939 and was meant to provide its American readers with an overview of (Christian Protestant) missionary activity around the world; it was published independent of any mission organization (see Sherwood & Pierson, 1887; Simnowitz, 2022; for archival copies, see Christian Archives for Islamic Studies, n.d.).

The colonial epistemology underlying the accounts written by SPC administrators and faculty is not all that surprising, given American missionaries' efforts to colonize the region through educational institutions and native-language publications for more than 80 years. As President of the Board, Dodge (1909) explained to the U.S. Secretary of State in a letter written shortly after the crisis began, "[American Missions in Turkey have] been perhaps, the most notable contributions [America] has made for the enlightenment of other nations" through education, which included the Syria Mission's "five important centers ... , educational Institutions of high grade and a long list of smaller schools Its press, in capacity and output, stands second among Mission presses in the world" (pp. 4-5). The missionaries and the SPC administrators alike, in other words, saw SPC as one arm of their work, a part of their broader project of colonization.

SPC students were well aware of the colonial and anti-Muslim attitudes of some of their teachers and members of the ABCFM's mission in Syria, and some of the claims the students made in their writing drew upon these attitudes to persuade their audience, who, it was implied, shared the students' understanding and experiences of implicit or explicit racism and xenophobia in their interactions with foreigners in the region. The tone of many of the articles published during the period of student protest suggests that writers were voicing concerns that had been long held: Repeated references to the "despotism" of the recent past, for example, suggest that the views and criticisms of the writers, and their audiences, had been silenced or censored by the Ottoman Empire prior to the 1908 Revolution. The language used also assumed a shared optimism about the future of the post-Revolution Empire. The writers involved in the 1909 debate projected a future for the Empire in which the local population would be autonomous, no longer dependent upon foreign institutions for cultural and social development. Critics and even supporters of SPC during the crisis regularly problematized the college's position as a foreign school funded (and founded) by American Protestant missionaries. Many of the debates about Western education articulated by the local community and SPC students during the protest paralleled the debates in Arabic-language magazines and newspapers published by students at SPC between 1899 and 1920. These publications and the rhetorics circulating within them are discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Several articles represent well some of the strongest condemnation of SPC on the grounds of its foreign, potentially colonizing, influence within the local community. In one article, titled "Foreign Schools in the Ottoman Empire," the author, El-Ghali (1909), criticized "orators and writers" before him who had failed to "[strike] a blow at the doors of these foreign

schools or shown what injury they have done to the customs of the people of this country of the Orient, their characteristics, their religious tenets and their political also." El-Ghalieni did not elaborate about the "injury" that foreign schools such as SPC had committed, but the tone suggests that the sentiment would be well understood by the newspaper's audience.

In a second article, titled "Bigotry in the American College," Towfik (1909), of Egypt, offered a strong critique of the college and directed his words to the school forcefully, putting them on the spot by using the second-person pronoun "you." In this article, Towfik argued that SPC had "bewitched us like the college of Carthage and Rom[e]." Doubling down on his references to well-known Western empires, Towfik complained that "you have dwelt in our hearts for half a century and conquered them as did Napoleon the Great." Additionally, in an appeal directed toward *The Mohammedan Nation*,³¹ an anonymous author commented on the politics of foreign educators in the region, writing,

The Occidentals perceived the schools are power. They organized societies and sent their mission to the east when they founded their institutions for the purpose of attracting our sons to them. They erected schools to educate the young not for our benefit but for theirs, and not to augment thereby our power but their own. (*The Mohammedan Nation*, ca. 1909)

In both of these articles, the writers not only constructed a clear division between Muslims and the Westerners who had brought schools to the region but also explicitly named and criticized the coloniality underpinning the Christian mission's project. In other words, they explicitly exposed and critiqued the false promises of the education offered by SPC.

In an article published much later, in July 1909, after the school year had ended and the college returned to its original policy of requiring attendance at religious services, the Committee of the Moslem Students in the Syrian Christian College (1909) addressed the "united Ottoman people" in order to "complain ... about the hegemony of the faculty in your midst as well as your future men ... who have been forced to silence their voices of conscience against their will." The committee characterized the experience as "submissive and humiliating to the Ottoman Empire where the foreigner stays in its midst corrupting the laws and regulations without impediment ... while the days of disguise and ignorance are long past and our people are now free."³¹ In a similar vein, Fouad Hantes (1909) outlined the ways in which he saw

31 This article was reprinted in at least four newspapers.

Western schools as having a harmful, denationalizing influence on the local population; he argued that “the youth that are brought up in these schools are raised for a purpose that wasn’t entailed for them in the first place in light of their identity. Because they are made to believe that this land is not theirs and that its skies are not theirs. They are brought up with a partiality to those countries more so than that of their homeland.” While sharing similarities to some of the other articles published during this period, these two articles went further in arguing that the American missionary presence in the region did psychological damage to the students who attended their schools.³² This implication was rhetorically powerful in its own right and served as a call for Muslims to unify around this issue. Similar arguments also arose in the student-authored magazines and newspapers published at SPC at around the same time, a topic taken up in the next chapter.

Some articles accused the college not only of carrying a colonizing influence in the region but also of being deliberately harmful and nefarious in its religious ideology. An anonymous editorial in *Moweyid* (المؤيد or *The Advocate*) critical of SPC, for example, argued that “these places of learning are only churches under the guise of schools and ... their professors and directors are merely missionaries under the guise of teachers” (*The Strike of the Moslem Students*, 1909). The authors of this editorial further suggested that the college purposefully deceived the local community, writing that the local population

... cherished in [their] minds a lingering belief that these people were expending these funds and enduring the toils of travel and the burden of exile out of love for the service of humanity alone without the slightest blemish of partisanship, but ... they do not bestow upon us Moslems these schools freely and are not giving to us science and knowledge as a gift but they are selling them to us at a high price, employing great fraud, like an avaricious trader.

In another article, an anonymous SPC student outlined three different kinds of schools: the “quasi-political” or nationalistic schools, the religious schools, and—the category to which the student said SPC belonged—schools that were “founded in the country in the name of humanity giving the people to understand that they seek the good of the country. They are thus enabled to drop poison unperceived into the nourishment they offer” (A Student, 1909). Another harsh critique of SPC was published later in the year, prior to the

32 This rhetorical approach is similar to that of the Iranian mid-20th-century writer Jalal Al-e Ahmad in *Gharbazdegi*, as described by Ahmadi (2023) and Raewyn Connell (2020).

start of the 1909 fall semester, by an author simply identified as "A Witness." Opening with the line, "By God, he lies who says that despotism is dead," the writer continued by arguing that even though the government has changed, "[despotism] is still alive and stirring in many of the foreign institutions that live on the money of the sons of this Empire, and in many of the Ottomanized Western companies which, not content with wringing money from the people, aim at their bodies and souls as well" (A Witness, 1909). Collectively, these writers argued—significantly in Arabic rather than in English—that SPC and institutions like it were fraudulent, poisonous, and destructive, particularly for Muslim students. Writers wrestled in explicit ways with the colonial epistemology that was transmitted through American literacy education and its implications for the local community.

Even those who were supportive of the college did not deny its Christian mission and Western influence, but these writers framed these characteristics of the school as positive, not negative. Although seemingly contradictory to their Muslim identity, the positive framing of SPC's American identity illustrates that Muslim views of the college were not homogeneous. In fact, many who were aware of the college's coloniality accepted it as a foundational part of its American identity. Towfik Abu Raad (1909), a former student, argued that the required chapel services were "only ... lessons in universal morality"; he also wrote, "This is the meaning of the American College. Such it has been and such it continues to be, and I do not think it is to be blamed if it is fit for the continuance of these lessons of universal morality as it remains firm in the continuance of the English language." Abu Raad's defense of SPC on the grounds that it was merely fulfilling its mission as an *American* college explicitly illustrates how Christian colonial epistemology helped to justify American missionary work and the college's mission in the region during that time period. Abu Raad's defense explicitly promoted the colonial myth that a "universal morality" exists, and he tied the English language to this myth. For Abu Raad, the teaching of "universal" truths and the English language were self-evident and fundamental components of American identity and, therefore, American literacy education.

No doubt, Abu Raad's (1909) argument mirrored those made by SPC faculty and administrators as they defended the school's religious requirement. They never wavered in their confidence that their mission—promoting a Christian education—was "the meaning of the American College" abroad. In other words, for all stakeholders, "American" meant "Protestant Christian," and some would therefore never have the opportunity to gain the cultural citizenship that seemed to be promised in and through SPC. Moore's (1909a) speech to faculty on January 25 argued that SPC administrators "frankly

desire to enroll non-Christians; not to swell our numbers, not ... to toady to Moslems, —none of that; but because we believe the hour has struck when *we can reach just those who most need our work*” (emphasis added). Indeed, an American education, for leaders of the college and for some students and community members, was one that explicitly posed education—particularly education in English—as deeply entwined with Christian morals and values, thus forwarding the epistemological colonization that defined American missionary work in the region. However, the protesting students during the 1909 “Muslim Crisis” refused to accept SPC’s exclusionary assumptions, and they drew on their Arabic-language resources to express their agency in the face of the oppression that they experienced at the college.

Reinscribing America

The appeals that the students and other stakeholders made throughout the strike provide clues about how American law and values were understood in the region, especially in light of recent sociopolitical transformations marked by the key words of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.” Indeed, the Young Turk Revolution, which temporarily transformed the Ottoman government, motivated students to seek the religious freedom that they assumed existed in America based on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and that they hoped the new Ottoman government would uphold. But the students’ arguments pushed up against the reality that American “separation of church and state” only applied to the public sphere, and no Ottoman laws at the time favored the students’ position. What’s more, because the American imaginary was built upon a Protestant Christian and colonial foundation, Muslims were simply not accounted for in the formation of America’s legal system.³³

Some members of the faculty seemed to respect and understand the students’ claims about the illegality of SPC’s religious requirement as resting on a moral understanding of American law. Professor Moore (1909a) noted in his speech to faculty, for example, his understanding that the students “appeal[ed] from the lower ground of our technical rights and even of their anticipated law, to the higher sphere of broad humanity, and [they] state[d] with courtesy and perfect circumspection that such compulsion does not accord with claims of freedom of conscience which Christians so frequently

33 Take, for example, the fact that many religious people do not attend church but instead attend mosques (masjids), temples, synagogues, etc., but Thomas Jefferson’s (1802) widely adopted description of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as a “wall of separation between *church* and state” (emphasis added) within public institutions takes Christianity for granted (as cited in Bailey, 2020).

make" (p. 5). In other words, students' legal appeals were based on a sense of morality, which, even if not technically accurate, reflected their understanding of American democracy and, not incidentally, American Christianity. As such, these appeals represent the striking students' efforts to achieve the cultural citizenship that SPC's education seemed to promise—efforts that would ultimately fail.

Throughout the strike, students remained loyal to SPC and expressed their desire for an adequate resolution reflecting their understanding of what it meant to be an ideal American and to show that they belonged in the college. Students referred to SPC as "their Mother," whom they did not want to leave ([A student reply], ca. 1909). According to Moore (1909a), the students "liken[ed] the situation to a man who, in the desert, owns a well of pure water; travelers, faint with thirst, pass by, and the owner of the well serves only whom he will." And in a different publication, a graduate of the college referred to SPC as "the source of life" (A former student, 1909).

At the same time, students and other stakeholders recognized that in spite of their loyalty, SPC remained beholden to its financial backers in the US. Ultimately, it was the Protestant community based in the US—and therefore their ways of thinking—that allowed the college to exist. In 1909, the source of the college's funding was an important and telling reality: The college had a responsibility to its trustees overseas, and thus the American Protestant answer to the question, "What is the meaning of the American college [in Syria]?" won out: The American college was meant to produce American-like Protestants. In other words, the religious requirement was maintained. Recognizing the power of SPC's American supporters, some critics characterized SPC's decision to uphold its regulations as inevitable. In the summer of 1909, writers directed their appeals to the community rather than the college. Their appeals suggest that the local community wanted the kind of education provided by SPC. The graduate who referred to SPC as "the source of life" also argued that "we ought ... to seek knowledge and to require learning" so as to remain on equal footing with "western nations" (A former student, 1909). Some writers felt that attending SPC and being present at religious services was worth the compromise, and the language they used suggests that they blamed themselves for their inability to provide a better education led by natives of the region. Dr. Ayoub Thabit (ca. 1909), for example, criticized his readers for remaining "dependent on the education that this College offers."

It was not until after Bliss returned in late February that the crisis was resolved. The students maintained their strike until a temporary agreement was reached between students and faculty in mid-March, when the striking students were allowed to attend alternate, non-religious classes until the end

of the semester. At the end of the school year, Bliss announced that all new and returning students the following semester would be required to sign an agreement stating their understanding of, and consent to attend, required religious services at the college.

The tensions discussed in this section illustrate how the idea of America, as well as its colonial power, was not disrupted but *reinscribed* at SPC as a result of the student protests against the college's religious requirements. The material conditions supporting SPC's existence served as specters of America in a remarkably different geopolitical location. These material forces, it turns out, were more powerful than the philosophical ideals that the students relied upon to demonstrate their aspirations to belong to the American college. When these efforts to persuade their American audiences failed at the beginning of the protest, SPC students exerted their literacies in a new way, by turning to their local community and using their linguistic resources to examine and debate the epistemological conflict that they encountered on the grounds of the college. These debates illustrate the autonomy and resourcefulness of the students in the face of an epistemological crisis. In addition, these debates articulated for the local population—and for current scholars and educators—the very real contradictions and harmful consequences of the coloniality underpinning SPC's American-style literacy education, which can shed light on the tensions that some students in writing classrooms navigate today.

Conclusion

The description and analysis I have provided in this chapter of two student protests at SPC in 1882 and 1909 corroborates the central claims of this book: The history of rhetoric and writing studies is inherently a transnational and translanguinal one, and understanding it as such offers us one step toward a *delinking* of the discipline with its colonial foundations. The case of student protests at SPC reveals how Anglocentric literacy education has historically been linked to colonialism and nationalism and the conflicts that arise as a result. In their attempts to perform an American cultural citizenship—a “state of being” rather than a legal category (Wan, 2011, p. 37)—SPC students learned during the two protests that belonging cannot be achieved through individual actions or behaviors. In their protests, students used forms of literate action and rhetorical appeals that they had learned at the college were distinctly American. These uses—the promises—of literacy, they believed, would demonstrate their belonging to the American college and enable them to help shape college policy accordingly. The students were surprised

and disappointed when their protests were met with resistance and even fear on the part of SPC administrators and faculty. As a result, the majority of the protesting students participated in critical and public debates about the college's value in the region, considered the risks posed to their identity and goals, and sometimes left the college altogether.

This account therefore gestures toward the negative consequences that can result from failing to address the "structuring tenets" (Cushman, 2016, p. 239) of the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies that have been informed by colonial epistemology—in this case, the link between citizenship and literacy education that has been made and promoted in much scholarship and writing curriculum. This principle can be traced in part to some of the discipline's foundational histories, which first helped construct the idea of "current-traditional" rhetoric and pedagogy (CTRP) and then characterized the contemporary discipline as resolving the problems attached to such practices through a commitment to critical literacy education with the aim of developing engaged (American) citizens. CTRP has been used repeatedly as a rhetorical trope in historical scholarship to measure the current discipline's progress and viability.³⁴ The discipline's foundational historians argued that CTRP could be traced back to 18th- and 19th-century rhetorical theory and that it was widely used at Harvard and elsewhere when first-year writing became a core general education course in U.S. universities in the late 19th century.³⁵ Foundational histories in rhetoric and writing studies, in other words, succeeded in "portray[ing]" writing instruction in the 19th century "as an intellectual and social abyss that swallowed up any and all ideas of rhetorical complexity" that could mostly be blamed on CTRP (Paine, 1999, p. 25).

However, many historians of 19th- and 20th-century writing instruction published since the 1990s have effectively complicated what scholars know

34 References to CTRP in rhetoric and writing studies scholarship generally refer to an approach to writing that values product over process or surface features over content and implies a one-to-one correspondence between a writer's mind and their writing. Terms such as *product*, *grammar* (or *error*, *correct/ion/ness*), *form/al/ulaic* (or *system/atic*, *standard/ized*, *mechanic/al*, *schema/tic*), *exposition*, and *style* (or *surface*) often substitute for, or are combined with, explicit uses of the phrase *current traditional*. Further, references to CTRP are often paired with, or exchanged for, words or phrases that convey strongly negative connotations—e.g., *exclusion(ary)*, *disappointing*, *pervasive*, *decay(ed)*, *static*, *backward*, *contentless*, and, my personal favorite, "a recipe for pain" (Crowley, 1998, p. 227). Daniel Fogarty (1959) was the first to use the term "current traditional," but most references to CTRP in our foundational histories are tied to Richard E. Young's (1978) definition of the term.

35 The foundational historians I reference include James Berlin, 1980, 1984, 1987; John Brereton, 1995; Robert Connors, 1981, 1986, 1997; Sharon Crowley, 1986, 1990, 1998; Wallace Douglas in Richard Ohmann, 1976; S. Michael Halloran, 1993; Susan Miller, 1991; Thomas Miller, 1997.

about how writing was actually taught in the US, and they collectively show that CTRP is a false construction based primarily on textbook evidence, White male voices, and also a limited number of elite institutions.³⁶ Yet writing studies scholars continue to refer to CTRP in explicit or implicit ways, using the trope as a rhetorical punching bag to present the discipline as progressive.³⁷ CTRP has offered the discipline an opportunity to claim a break from the past and to demonstrate contemporary scholarship and pedagogy as “new”—indeed, for Berlin (1987), the purpose of writing disciplinary history was to “vindicate the position of writing instruction in the college curriculum” (p. 1). Using these problematic narratives of CTRP, historians and others have disparaged past pedagogical practices as resulting from the rise of industrialization, scientism, and professionalism in the 19th and 20th centuries (Berlin, 1984, 1987; Clark & Halloran, 1993; Crowley, 1998), which, they have claimed, led to higher education “serving the needs of business and industry” (Berlin, 1984, p. 60), ostensibly in opposition to serving the greater public good (notwithstanding problems with how the “greater public good” has historically been defined).

And it is this idea of literacy education serving the greater public good—the idea that “writing courses prepare students for citizenship in a democracy” (Berlin, 1987, p. 188)—for which CTRP has been used as a rhetorical foil in much contemporary writing scholarship and literacy curriculum. In “breaking” with a falsely constructed CTRP of the past and promoting contemporary literacy education as a means to develop an engaged citizenry, the discipline has relied on colonial epistemology to lay the foundation for its viability as a distinct and valuable academic discipline. Scholars in rhetoric and writing studies have rarely questioned or recognized the roots of citizenship as a colonial construction which serves as a marker of inclusion and exclusion (Ribero, 2016). Indeed, “citizenship, with its exclusionary underpinnings, serves to buttress nationalist discourses of fear and jingoism that constitute the nation-state—the organizing structure of colonial/modern power” (Ribero, 2016, p. 41). This calls for interrogating the “nation” as a modern construction supporting colonization (Mignolo, 2007, p. 455), the ways in which so-called citizens might belong (or not), and the complexities that emerge as a result.

36 Scholars who have complicated foundational narratives by presenting important microhistories include JoAnn Campbell, 1992a, 1992b; Jean Ferguson Carr, Stephen L. Carr, & Lucille Schulz, 2005; P. Donahue, 2007; Enoch, 2008; Kathryn Fitzgerald, 2001; Gold, 2008; Greer, 1999, 2015, 2023; Byron Hawk, 2007; Susan Kates, 2001; Elizabeth Larsen, 1992; Kenneth Lindblom, William Banks, & Rise Quay, 2007; Beth Ann Rothermel, 2003, 2007; Sue Carter Simmons, 1995; Robin Varnum, 1996; Heidimarie Z. Weidner, 2007; Kathleen A. Welsch, 2007.

37 The idea of “progress” is also a colonial construction; see Mignolo, 2007, pp. 462–463.

What's more, as Tendayi Bloom (2018) noted,

Even critics [of the intrinsic value of citizenship] often focus on whether equality of citizenship is being realised, how to address barriers to it, or whether there is a need for new forms of citizenship. They seldom question the underlying assumption—and promotion—of liberal citizenship as the only legitimate relationship with a state. (p. 115)

Besides the obvious problems associated with promoting the ideals of (American) citizenship within U.S. literacy classrooms that include undocumented or international students, citizenship has also been used as a tool of settler colonialism in the United States. Bloom (2018) pointed to the 1887 Dawes Act and the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act to show that the United States government has historically imposed citizenship on Indigenous peoples as “a final step in the colonising process, forcing total submission to the American state” (p. 116).

Such complications disrupt the social justice orientation of the discipline, in which active citizenship and democratic participation are assumed to not only be *possible* for every student through literacy, but also to be a universal good. The case of student protests at SPC should prompt scholars, program administrators, and teachers to ask critical questions about the democratic potential of literacy education: How is “citizenship” defined; how does geopolitical context affect this definition; and who is included in or excluded from this definition? Who is allowed to be or act as a citizen within the framework of literacy education? What is at stake for those who are invited to participate as actual or hypothetical citizens? What are the risks and rewards associated with performing citizenship within the literacy classroom? If the idea of the nation—an imagined America—and citizenship itself is “aspirational, a promise” (Wan, 2011, p. 46), then literacy educators and program leaders who imagine themselves to be facilitators of engaged citizenship bear a great responsibility when such promises fail students, as they often do. Such failures were at work in the 1882 and 1909 protests at SPC. Taking a transnational view of the history of writing studies exposes the contradictions and conflicts that arise when colonial epistemology remains at the base of today's approaches to writing pedagogy.

Building upon the analysis presented in Chapter 3, this chapter shows that language(s) proved important to the two protest movements at SPC in 1882 and 1909 and carried significance for students as they wrote their way through the crises. Language and translingual exchange should therefore be both central and visible in rhetoric and writing studies' history, present, and

future. The translingual geopolitical context of Beirut, Syria, at the turn of the 20th century contributed to SPC student agency during these protests. The 1882 protest occurred before SPC had fully transitioned to English as the language of instruction, and students primarily appealed to SPC administrators using Arabic to object to the dismissal of their beloved Professor Lewis. Students fought to keep Lewis and the other medical faculty, who also happened to be the last holdouts of Arabic-language instruction, at the college. After all but one of these faculty members had resigned, SPC administrators privately expressed relief, with the last member of the medical faculty characterizing his former colleagues as a “half-hearted, half-educated (in the best sense), unwilling, un-American, missionary line of Professors” (as cited in Jeha, 2004, p. 90). When considering the role of language(s) during this protest, it is possible to see that students may have chosen to fight for this group of faculty because their commitment to the Arabic language represented a commitment to the place and the people, in contrast to the rest of the college, which was turning toward English and upholding the power of foreigners over decision-making. As a result of SPC’s refusal to reinstate Lewis, many of the protesting students chose to leave the college: Some took on important roles as Arabic-language writers in Syria and Egypt. I demonstrate in Chapter 3 that the college’s stated rationales for first Arabic and then English as the language of instruction were both steeped in colonial epistemology. However, the Arabic language on its own carried sociopolitical power for local students that signified respect for their culture and identity. The removal of long-time faculty who were fluent in Arabic and willing to translate Western knowledge into the local language must have carried extra weight for the students who were affected, and it likely pushed them to leave the college as a result.

During the 1909 protest, SPC students negotiated with college administrators and faculty in English in an effort to change the policy that required all students to attend chapel services. At the same time, the students—along with many community members—participated in heated discussions about the college’s place in the region in Arabic-language journals that circulated throughout the region. These debates reveal that the local community held a deep, almost intrinsic, understanding of what was at stake when Western educational enterprises entered the region. All seemed to understand that the colonial epistemology underlying much Western education ran up against local ways of thinking and believing, but they did not all agree upon the risks and rewards of Western education and the exposure to coloniality that was brought with it. Some vehemently opposed engaging with educational institutions such as SPC, while others saw the institutions as relatively harmless. Some resigned themselves to receiving a particular brand of education

from SPC—instruction in English and the “lessons in universal morality” represented by SPC’s controversial chapel services simply *was* “the meaning of the American college” (Abu Raad, 1909). Importantly, these discussions among the local and regional community were held in Arabic rather than English, demonstrating the value of centralizing language(s)—including languages that have been suppressed—in understanding the history of rhetoric and writing studies, as well as its present and future. The 1909 protest spread beyond the walls of the college, and students demonstrated agency in the conflict by drawing from their multiple linguistic resources, participating in the debates themselves in Arabic, while interacting with SPC administrators and faculty in English. As such, this case of translingual negotiation and exchange highlights how important it is to question the discipline’s underlying tenet of monolingualism and recognize that “*English* is” *not* “the *only* language of knowledge making and learning” (Cushman, 2016, p. 234).

This chapter’s decolonial analysis of the 1882 and 1909 student protests at SPC holds implications for productively *delinking* from the discipline’s colonial foundations. Specifically, these protests provide us with a better understanding of why contemporary students may resist efforts to connect literacy with citizenship, democracy, and upward mobility. While literacy is undoubtedly a necessary tool for active participation in democracy, it also often fails to produce the idealistic outcomes that instructors sometimes espouse (see Lagman, 2018, and Lorimer Leonard, 2013). Suggesting that literacy—particularly writing in English—will lead to universally positive outcomes is unrealistic, and students may see these implied promises as disingenuous when they fail. What’s more, as previously noted, writing programs and instructors cannot assume that students have equal access to citizenship or that citizenship is necessarily desirable for them. Making such assumptions can alienate or demotivate those students whom instructors are most interested in serving. In short, those of us in rhetoric and writing studies must be careful not to conflate citizenship with English-language literacy.

In addition, this analysis should remind us that students are agentive and autonomous and that they will use many linguistic, multimodal, and technological resources to negotiate and make sense of their literacy education. When this agency is denied, they may walk away from the opportunities that are on offer, as many of the protesting SPC students did when the college refused to change its policies. Or, even if they stay, students may ultimately feel excluded or alienated from the educational environment, even as they proceed through the curriculum. In other words, students may achieve a utilitarian goal in performing what is expected and receiving a degree but fall short of engaging deeply with course content. In order to facilitate critical

engagement in the literacy classroom, programs and instructors must give students the opportunity to show where, when, and with what resources they use literacy outside of the classroom, and then work with them to develop rhetorical flexibility and skill in contexts that matter to them. We must also remain sensitive to the high stakes and contradictions that many students, particularly historically minoritized students, face as they navigate the writing classroom and all the promises it implies. Making these choices, as literacy educators and program leaders, has the potential to produce pluriversal definitions for the meaning and value of literacy that is free from the colonial baggage that has historically chained writing instruction with problematic constructions of citizenship.