EATING HOMES: A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO THE REPRESENTATION OF
ARAB AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB AMERICAN
WRITINGS ON FOOD

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By

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INTRODUCTION:
Conscience and Controversy in Contemporary Arab American Food Literature

_A baklawa backlash is brewing_
_and I am starved for_
_metaphors._

—Zeina Azzam Seikaly

Contemporary Arab American literature is situated in a larger debate about the meaning and usefulness of the term “Arab American” and how this community should be represented in literature and art.1 This debate is rooted in six key conditions, which together compose the “room” in which Arab American’s write: (1) the continuing elusiveness of the term “Arab” as a definitive category; (2) the specific history of categorization that Arab Americans have undergone in the United States – “Ottoman,” “Syrian,” “Caucasian,” “not quite white”;2 (3) the assimilationist legacy of the first wave of Arab (mostly Christian, “Syrian” immigrants and the rejection of this attitude by later immigrant waves of more diverse Arab origins; (4) the prevalence of orientalist and neo-orientalist representations of Arabs and Arab Americans in Western

1 I am not engaging in this debate but rather merely reflecting on it. The writings I examine are variously positioned within this debate on Arab American identity.

print and non-print media; (5) the alienating policies the Bush administration has
enacted towards Arabs domestically and abroad as part of its “War on Terror,” and
finally; (6) The spot-light that American media has turned on Arab Americans since
September 11. All of these conditions contribute to the longevity of the debate, which
still remains largely unresolved, even after a century of Arab American writing. ³

Among the conditions listed, neo-orientalism is particularly noteworthy as it
dominates the representational space of Arab Americans. As a discourse, neo-
orientalism is a redressing of the orientalist practices Said described in his critique,
Orientalism, within current frameworks and agendas. ⁴ Although in an updated form,
neo-orientalism continues to “otherize” the “East” as the necessary antithesis of the
“West,” thus robbing it of independent identity and voice. As with orientalism,
through rigid binaries, the “other” is locked into a dependent definitional category such
that if the West is masculine, modern and secular, then the East must be feminine,
primitive and religious. Many of the old orientalist fixations persist in the new
orientalist discourse, such as fascination with the eastern sexuality and “deviance,” the
veil, and tribal or clan affiliations. Neo-orientalism, however, adds an additional lens
that is colored by the shape and contour of the present power economy. One instance
of this is the entry of democracy theory into neo-orientalist discourse as a justification

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³ see Elmaz Abinader, “Children of Al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a
state.gov/journals/itsv/0200/ijse/toc.htm>; Evelyn Shakir, “Arab-American Literature,”
New Immigrant Literatures in the United States, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling
for war and imperial action. As a result, neo-orientalism paints Arabs as both technology-wielding trans-national terrorists as well as primitive peoples of archaic, timeless societies.

In such a writing environment, Arab American writers are tenuously posed in relation to the broader Arab American community as well as their often more inclusive readership and publishing houses. On one side, they are asked by the Arab American community to present a just and humane Arab face to the United States through mainstream publication. To some extent, this endeavor entails acting as a mouthpiece to national, pan-national and religious agendas. It also asks authors to write with the consciousness, sensitivities and priorities of a group instead of their own, should they deviate. On the other side, to acquire a mainstream readership, Arab American writers must acquire the patronage of larger publishing companies, who, in turn, take license with the presentation and marketing of their works. As Heather Hoyt pointed out in her recent paper entitled, “Cover Girls and Catch Words: Packing Arab Women’s Novels in English,” the resulting packaging is often at odds with the authors’ intentions. Additionally, readers are entirely free to read and interpret each piece at will—sometimes taking fiction as realistic portraiture and personal narrative as

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representative of an entire group. These two competing pressures—the pressure to be a voice for the Arab American community and the pressure to publish and thereby make some accommodations to a mainstream American viewpoint—are placed on top of the already “written” experiences of the author’s life which is often their primary point of creative departure. In sum, Arab American writers are caught in a double bind: they are asked to tell the truth, but only so far as it presents the right sort of image of Arab culture. They are asked to represent something greater than themselves while they, themselves, reject readings of their work that generalize Arab men and women. They are charged with changing the public mind but can only reach this great entity through certain negotiations, many of which are political and discursive.

Despite this slippery terrain, Arab Americans have decided to write. As Muaddi Darraj points out in the introduction to her edited volume, Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing, the choice is: “Write or be written.”7 The decision to write, however, does not however mean there is any kind of consensus on how to deal with the difficult issue of ethnic representation or that Arab communities in the United States have received their works with equal recognition and censure.

Writings on food as a mode of ethnic representation have provoked particular controversy within the Arab American writing community and readership. The concern, for many, is that food is simply too sweet a dish to serve up. As Barbara

Nimri Aziz commented during the most recent RAWI conference in a panel entitled, “Beyond Baklava and Grapeleaves,” food is the primary way that Arab Americans have related to mainstream America. In fact, foods such as **hummus**, **falafel**, and **tabouleh** are among the few Arab cultural items that have actually entered American grocery stores, households, and even vernacular speech. Thus, writings that use **baqlawa** and other commonly known foods as an expression of Arabness are an easy sell, in many ways, as they enter a preexisting and inoffensive space.

More pointedly, in a situation where Arab Americans are typecast as Quran-waving terrorists or veiled, oppressed temptresses, many inside the community wonder if food goes far enough in telling the truth. In the introduction to the *MELUS* special issue on Arab American Literature, Salah D. Hassan and Marcy Jane Knopf-Newman speak to this concern. Referring to Gregory Orfalea’s *Grapeleaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* and Joanna Kadi’s *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, they comment: “[T]he reference to food can be seen as a trope of accommodation, as these anthologies seek to make accessible an Arab culture that is generally approached in an adversarial manner in the US.”

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9 However, the successful entry of these foods into mainstream commercial and discursive spaces rests in part on Israeli appropriation and promotion of these same foods. For recent discussion, see George S. Hishmeh, “The Undeclared War on Arab Cuisine,” *Gulf News*, 29 August 2007, 14 September, 2007 <http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/07/08/30/10150036.html>.

this view, food writings are accused of being a kind of “black-face” routine, which presents Americans with an agreeable, consumable Arab.

This debate also approaches serious questions about the meaning of the term “Arab American.” The subtext to these questions is even more salient: under what conditions does a person qualify for the title of Arab American? And by extension, under which circumstances can or will a particular writer be recognized by the Arab American community? As summarized by Fadda-Conrey, some scholars such as Nadine Naber describe Arab American identity as a political choice. By Naber’s account, Arab Americans only become the target of racism when they politically align themselves with Arab interests. She writes, “What distinguishes this new racism (which is based upon politics) from traditional forms of racism (which are based upon biology or phenotype) is that Arab Americans who choose to be active in Palestinian or Arab issues or organizations may be subjected to political racism, whereas those who choose not to be politically active may not.”\(^\text{11}\) If this is true, then some Americans of Arab descent may be perceived as living outside of the paradigm of minority ethnic experience in the United States. In this case, the question becomes whether such writers can be relevant to the Arab American community. Mona Simpson, a Syrian-American novelist, is a documented example of the workings out of this question, as a

novelist of some acclaim who is generally not counted among Arab American authors.\textsuperscript{12}

Despite this internal debate on food literature, the landscape of Arab American literature in the past and present continues to flourish with food metaphors, colorful descriptions of old world dishes and even cooking tips. As previously mentioned, several anthologies and edited volumes incorporate food in their titles. Diana Abu Jaber’s food memoir, entitled \textit{The Language of Baklava} (2005) and Pauline Kaldas’ \textit{Letter from Cairo} (2007) are two examples of recent works that weave together narrative and recipes. Predictions that food writing is merely the first stage of ethnic literatures have, in this case, yet to prove true.\textsuperscript{13} With this notable trend in mind, one is forced to ask the following questions: What is it about food that has so captured the imagination of Arab American writers? What does food express about the experience of being Arab in America, before and after 9/11? How does food fit into the act of self-representation, and thus, the question of identity?

The purpose of this thesis is to survey a selection of Arab American writings that deal with food in some way—whether in a dominant, structural sense or as a passing pointed metaphor. I based my selection primarily on the quality and

\textsuperscript{12} Mara Naaman, “Invisible Ethnic: the Arab American Novels of Mona Simpson,” RAWI Conf., 18 May 2007. In her presentation, Naaman discussed why the Arab American community never claimed Simpson, perhaps because of her ambivalence towards her own Syrian American heritage. Naaman argues that we ought to read even representations such as Simpson’s as part of the Arab American experience—especially since the option of “passing” is part of that experience.

\textsuperscript{13} Based on multiple informal discussions that took place at RAWI Conf., 18 May 2007.
importance of the “food content”—no matter how lengthy or brief—to the overall piece as well as narrative stories or poetry. In some cases, I have also counted beverages, especially coffee and tea, as food writing because they are part of the ritual of preparing, serving and eating a meal.

Although this is not a comprehensive analysis of all existing works, I have attempted to collect a representative sample, focusing on works by authors who have been recognized by the Arab American literary community in some manner. The only group of works that is rather exceptional in this sense is the cookbook-memoirs. These writings are more distant from the Arab American literary community because of their content and equally important, the gap between literary writings and professional or other non-literary writings. For this genre, I focused on works with a strong narrative element—although these work still range substantially in narrative vs. cooking content. Other genres of writing that I will explore here are poetry and short fiction. Despite my efforts to be as inclusive as possible, the majority of authors in this analysis have their origins in the Levant. This trend, however, is not unique to my selection but rather indicative of the field at large at this point in time.

It should also be noted that works on food by authors of non-Arab descent or of ethnic minority groups with historical ties to the Arab and Muslim world, are not a part

14 My sources include fiction and non-fiction works, including cookbook-memoirs. However, I do not study cookbooks because they do not contain narrative content. 
of this analysis, even in cases such as Claudia Roden, who spent a large portion of her
life in Egypt. Although these may provide some interesting parallels and
comparisons, they will not lead to the same questions or possible conclusions about
identity. For example, a Jewish immigrant from an Arab country enters a very
different matrix of in-groups and out-groups when he moves to the United States than
does an ethnically Arab Egyptian. However, neither does it follow that the situations
of the authors are identical, since “Arab American” has many different forms.
Naturally, many factors play an influential role, including but not limited to: country of
origin, stage of immigration relative to other Arab Americans, reason for departure,
and age at the time of first seeing the United States.

My own experience falls somewhat outside of the cast. I was born to a
American father of European descent and a Palestinian mother—from a Christian,
Nasira family. Although born in the United States, my family moved to Cairo when I
was a young girl. By the time my mother’s wish to go home was fulfilled, I was 8
years old and the First Intifada was in full gear. I spent the remainder of my
childhood and teenage years in East Jerusalem, attending a private British school.
Although I visited the United States many times as a child, my permanent move to this
country did not occur until I began college in Illinois and experienced severe—even at
times debilitating—culture shock.

All of that is to say that my identity as a Palestinian and an American has never
been straightforward. While I have always been Arab American, my first real
encounter with other Arab Americans did not occur until my adult years. Although I
moved to the United States at the age of 17, I did not fit neatly into the category of a first or even 1.5-generation immigrant.

My life illustrates the point that Arab American can mean a variety of different things. Even in situations where circumstances appear to be similar, personality and choice also factor into identity formation and may result in very different self views. Consequently, it is critical to avoid conceptual models that approach immigrant, ethnic-minority or hyphenated-cultural experience in the singular case. Range and plurality of experience are givens and thus conclusions should be around meaningful patterns and shared ground rather than fixed marks.

These goals rest on the definition of identity I am employing, which is closest to Stuart Hall’s third conceptual category: the post modern subject. As laid out in Hall’s “The Question of Cultural Identity,” the post modern conception of identity is neither biological, essential, nor permanent. Instead, it is defined historically, and shifts between contexts and audiences. Hall writes: “If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves.” The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with—at least temporarily.”\textsuperscript{17} In contrast, the Enlightenment subject is a “fully centered, unified

\textsuperscript{17} Hall 598.
individual . . . whose ‘center’ consisted of an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born” and the sociological identity is an “interaction’ between self and society” with an essential core. In both of these conceptions, such a thing as a “real self” exists and is discernible from other external influences. This self develops but it does not shift or change is essence.

My adoption of the post modern identity model deeply influences this analysis—in particular, the type of conclusions I believe are possible. I do not believe that an “authentic self” exists and only requires uncovering. By extension, I reject the notion that cultural identities are certain, singular, stable or even handed down as a whole package in any location. I believe that identity, like culture, is constantly constructed and deconstructed along varying axes and shifting systems of power and language. This is not truer in the experiences of ethnic minorities or other individuals with hyphenated identities, however, these situations often make more plain the deep fragility and complexity of identity.

Literature provides a unique arena for exploring identity issues. For story, like the post modern identity, is made up of narratives. Whether remembered or imagined, narratives provide insight into the author’s view of the individual and society. In particular, these authors tell the story of Arab American experience in some way. Furthermore, literature is a space for voice, empowerment and self-representation. The author is free to manipulate, arrange and frame the space as she wishes, in an effort to display her specific vision. Although the audience and the publishers intrude upon this

18 Hall 597.
space in certain ways, it is still a relatively malleable space. While some may be wary of the ambiguity and subjectivity of literature as the raw material for such a study, I can think of few vehicles more apt for exploring the complexity and humanity of identity.

My approach in this analysis is somewhat eclectic. In general, I am reading literature against the grain, asking anthropological questions of creative and didactic texts. Literary analysis also figures in, as it would be impossible to ignore the craftsmanship, aims and demands of each work’s genre. I also incorporate discourse analysis, as language and text are the primary medium I examine. Combining these three elements—anthropological, literary and discursive analysis—my research takes on a distinctively interdisciplinary color, inflected by my positioning and training.

In structure, I have divided the texts simply between two categories: food writings that seek to remember and celebrate the old home (“old world food literature”), and food writings that deal with the new home (“new world food literature”). In content and setting, most of the texts I examine fit well into one of these groups, however there is one exception, which I will discuss in the second chapter. My analysis turns first to the old world literature and investigation of the expressive modes of this body of works. In the third chapter I treat new world literature, focusing on recurrent identity themes in an attempting to provide a broad view of trends and similarities in the new world texts. The final chapter examines issues of food, memory and writing more closely in order to understand the
relationship of these entities to Arab American identity as expressed by the food literature as a whole.

In general, I argue against reductive readings of Arab American food literature, especially those that would dismiss these writings as apolitical and accommodationist. In their stead, I offer an identity reading of this significant and persistent trend in Arab American literature, which has ultimately resulted in the construction of an Arab American food-identity discourse. This discourse combats orientalism and neo-orientalism, assuages identity anxiety, creates and codifies Arab American identities, thus providing a solution to the dilemmas of defining and representing Arabs in America.
CHAPTER 1:
Food Literature and the Old World

The food literature of the old world is primarily made up of cookbook-memoirs, in contrast to the new world writings, where poetry and fiction prevail. The cookbooks-memoirs are semi-autobiographical works, which weave narration into and between recipes. They range significantly in length, structure and narrative vs. cooking content. In contrast, cookbooks are primarily didactic texts, structured and organized to serve as cooking manuals, and thus I will not be addressing them within the corpus of study that I have chosen for this thesis. The authors straddle multiple generations, writing from the oppositional perspectives of recovering and discovering homelands.

Three modes of writing arise in old world Arab American food literature: (1) Cultural Instruction—describing and often, defending the Arab world to the United States; (2) Cultural Transmission—recording, preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge; (3) Proof—providing evidence of an authentic Arab identity and authoritative food knowledge. The first two modes are didactic in nature although targeted at very different audiences. Proof is a secondary mode and more personal in tone. All three modes tell something of the authors’ understanding of identity.
Cultural instruction provides a strong incentive for many Arab American writers, as they seek to bridge the East-West divide. If their audience is American, this instruction must enter an existing discourse and body of knowledge that has much negative knowledge of the Middle East and inclines towards Orientalism. Written representation enters this lexicon and can proceed in only one of two directions: to systematically refute stereotypes and replace them with positive knowledge of the Arab World, or to prove and uphold the existing paradigm. Both choices entail addressing a neo-Orientalist curiosity with a predefined—although often invisible—set of expectations and fascinations. Consequently, several of the cookbook-memoirs examined here adopt an apologetic approach, defending their homelands and cultural inheritance. Others create distance between themselves and the world of food they depict, reaffirming long-held categories.

Among the neo-Orientalist fictions cultural instruction attempt to counteract are myths of Arab primitivism, ignorance and violence. In lieu of this barbaric vision, cultural instruction delineates the intricacy of food preparation, longevity of food traditions, and variety of palette in Arab cuisine. Stories of the old home confirm its beauty, peacefulness, and worthiness of knowing. In this seemingly innocuous undertaking, cultural instruction quietly gains discursive ground.

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19 see Said, Orientalism.
Aziz Shihab’s cookbook memoir, *A Taste of Palestine: Menus and Memories* is a strong example of cultural instruction. Although his acknowledgements indicate cultural transmission as a main objective, the selected vignettes point in a different direction. Whether American or Arab-American, his intended audience is clearly one who holds little positive knowledge of Palestine. Accordingly, his memories serve as a corrective of stereotypes. In particular, his stories teach that Palestinians are peaceful rather than violent, hospitable rather than vindictive, and culturally rich rather than primitive. He paints a picture of Palestine where neighbors, regardless of their religion or ethnicity, befriend each other and share food.

Shihab’s audience is implied most strongly in the simplistic tone he adopts throughout his narration. The childhood stories he recalls are moralistic, and uncomplicated, each with a clearly articulated lesson. In “My Friend Moshe,” for instance, Shihab describes his relationship with a Jewish boy and his sister, Esther, who lived a short distance from his house. As they grew older, Moshe’s mother became less comfortable with the boys’ friendship and although not fully understanding why, Shihab senses this change. “I felt unwelcome in Moshe’s house. I suddenly stopped going.”  This artless two-page recollection directly challenges the

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20 “Over the years, my children and grandchildren have often asked me to tell them stories of my life in Palestine. They have also often wanted to eat ‘my foods.’ This book is largely a response to their requests.” Aziz Shihab, *A Taste of Palestine: Menus and Memories* (San Antonio: Corona, 1993) ix.

21 Shihab 14.
“clash of civilizations,”²² by which the Arabs are timelessly wed to conflict with their oppositional other. Instead, Shihab simply teaches that at one time, Arab and Jews were neighbors and friends.

As Carol Bardenstein notes in her article Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoir of Middle Eastern Exiles, Shihab may have adopted this voice, consciously or unconsciously, due to his grandchildren’s request.²³ However, she goes on to argue: “there may be other factors, contributing to a representation in which virtually any irritant, difficulty, or complexity has been elided.”²⁴ Cultural instruction provides one of these factors, as Shihab takes the most direct approach to telling the truth. Perhaps fearing further misunderstanding, Shihab takes almost no risks, leaving few memories open-ended or susceptible to multiple interpretations.

Teaching that Arabs, and especially Palestinians, are a peaceful people is one of the cookbook-memoir’s principal aims. “The Peace Party,” as the title indicates, candidly addresses this topic. The story begins with a conflict between two families, which originates with young, ill-mannered Mahir on the day he stopped in the street to talk to the beautiful Yasmeen. The two families are on the brink of a bloody brawl, when two old men intercede and arrange a peace party. When the appointed time arrives, Mahir’s family present a public apology along with rice, sugar, cigarettes,

²³ Bardenstein 367.
²⁴ Bardenstein 367.
sheep, and money to Yasmeen’s family. The result: the two families reconcile and eat together. Shihab writes, “Since the peace party took place in the morning, breakfast was served by one of Mahir’s uncles to all the male relatives of Yasmeen. ‘With a full stomach, one forgets his anger quicker.’”

Although “The Peace Party” at first fulfils neo-Orientalist expectations, the ending turns them on their head. Initially, the idea of a family feud fits a picture of an old tribal society divided by clan loyalties. Likewise, Yasmeen’s family’s offense at Mahir’s trivial attentions to the young girl is in keeping with a view of the Arab world as sexually repressed. It is a surprise when the inevitable act of revenge is cut short and replaced with an amicable meal. Food, in this story, is the means and expression of peaceful resolution.

Shihab speaks even more openly about peace in his first chapter, entitled “Muslims, Christians and Jews.” Putting aside even the metaphor of story and food, Shihab addresses his audience directly: “The Palestinians I knew—Arab and Jews—were not terrorists or world outlaws.” By this, Shihab unites two ethnicities under one identity: peaceful Palestinians. He continues to elaborate on this point, drawing on various illustrations as proof. Shihab’s strongest proof, however, is his own memory: “Some now claim that hatreds were, and are, old and deep in Palestine. I did not know this when I grew up there. I knew that my neighbors in Jerusalem shared

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25 Shihab 44.
26 Shihab 4.
their joys and their griefs.” The message to his audience is quite clear: what they know about Palestinians is wrong.

Another misconception Shihab’s cookbook-memoir attempts to rectify is that Arabs are a vindictive people. When presented with their oppressor, Shihab tells us that Arabs respond with hospitality, not retaliation. Shihab illustrates this point with a previous occupier, a troop of British soldiers and their leader, Officer Ford in the tale, “The People from London.” Officer Ford and his men intrude on a village meal that had been hastily scrambled together for a stranded group of boy scouts—one of whom was Aziz Shihab. Before any of the scouts has a chance to eat, Officer Ford, infuriated by the simple dishes, tramples the food. The village mayor arrives to find “Ford standing on top of the bread olives, cheese, eggs, and all the other dishes. The plates were broken and the food was on top of the straw mats.” The boys respond with tears and disappointment rather than action. Even the mayor’s response is mild and continues to express his generous disposition. “The mayor wanted to speak but Ford and his men walked away. He wanted to tell them that the villagers had no time to cook rice and lamb for honored British soldiers, that the food was brought in for the young Boy Scouts from the city.”

“The People From London” contrasts British brutality with Arab hospitality. As soon as the boy scouts reach the village, people rush to gather food from their homes and offer it to their boys. When the soldiers barge into the guesthouse,

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27 Shihab 4.
28 Shihab 33.
29 Shihab 33.
everyone moves to include the soldiers in their circle. “All of us, guests and villagers, stood up to make room for the soldiers. We invited them to share the food.” The humility and kindness of the villagers, who share their eggs and olives with strangers and even occupiers, stand in stark contrast to Ford’s cruelty. Although anger would be justified, the mayor’s sad thoughts betray only his wish to honor his guests.

“The Peace Party” also teaches about Arab hospitality, especially in the description of the reconciliatory breakfast “feast” served by Mahir’s family.\textsuperscript{30} Shihab devotes several paragraphs to descriptions of the food—the number, types and arrangement of dishes. He is careful to point out that “Yasmeen’s relatives . . ate to their hearts’ content,” as abundant food is synonymous with hospitality.\textsuperscript{31} This view was certainly shared Yasmeen’s uncle, Saeed, who proudly comments “The bad boy’s relatives served no less than two hundred dishes,’ . . . as if the larger the number of dishes the more honor was bestowed upon Yasmeen’s relatives.”\textsuperscript{32} Hospitality rather than revenge is again proved and taught through a meal.

Food is even more intimately tied to Shihab’s third corrective. He challenges the assumption that Arabs are culturally primitive or backwards, asserting their cultural richness and intricacy. The recipes, themselves, communicate cultural wealth in three ways. Firstly, when properly executed, their flavors imply a larger cultural storehouse. This sensory communication is powerful, despite the fact that Shihab simplifies some recipes for his American audience. Secondly, the narrative portions surrounding the

\textsuperscript{30} Shihab 44.
\textsuperscript{31} Shihab 44.
\textsuperscript{32} Shihab 44.
recipes link Palestinian cuisine to a long tradition—one which predates American history. For example, in his section on “Bethlehem Specialties,” he evokes the Christian past. “Women wore distinctive clothes—some said the same style of clothes worn during the time of Jesus.”

In other places, he describes the Bedouins’ “ceremonial ritual” for serving coffee and the food served to new mothers. Lastly, the audience actually confirms the value of Arab culture by purchasing Aziz Shihab’s book and sharing in their culinary culture. In a capitalist society where people, products and companies are measured alike in numeric sums, payment is perhaps the highest affirmation of all.

Cultural instruction is also undoubtedly the central mode of Nawal Nasrallah’s *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine*. Of all the cookbook-memoirs examined here, hers is the richest in scholarly content. Nasrallah begins her journey into Iraq’s culinary past with the Mesopotamian civilization, continuing all the way through to the first half of the 20th century. Although she stops short of providing comprehensive history, she provides extensive information about the eating habits, food sources and cooking techniques of each period.

Like Shihab, one of Nasrallah’s aims is to show the Iraqi people to be peaceful and tolerant. To this end, Nasrallah offers Kurdish and Turkumani recipes as well as warm memories about her diverse neighbors. She writes of Um Naseem, a Jewish

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33 Shihab 29.
34 Shihab 5.
35 Shihab 95.
housewife who sent over plates of tibeet to Nasrallah’s house; an Armenian neighbor
who “was, without dispute, the best pastry maker”; a Kurdish belly-dancer who visited
Nasrallah’s family after her brother’s death.\footnote{Nawal Nasrallah, Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine (Bloomington: 1st Books, 2003) 2.} Even in her biographical information, Nasrallah describes herself as Iraqi only. Thus, on all occasions, Nasrallah presents a
unified and peaceful face to Iraq.

Additionally, Nasrallah joins Shihab in fighting the stereotype of Arab cultural
backwardness. In contrast, Nasrallah details Iraq’s rich cultural past. There are
numerous examples to draw from during which Nasrallah shows the sophistication of
Iraq’s predecessors in all things related to food. Some of the early knowledge she
highlights include health remedies, culinary and linguistic exchange, and weight loss.
Her journeys through Iraq’s food history give ample evidence of Iraq’s rich and length
culinary traditions.

Unlike Shihab’s and Nasrallah’s texts, cultural transmission is the primary
mode in both Linda Dalal Sawaya’s Alice’s Kitchen: My Grandmother Dalal and
Mother Alice’s Traditional Lebanese Cooking and Janet Kalush’s Kibee ‘n’ Spice and
Everything Nice: Popular and Easy Recipes for the Lebanese and American family. In
content, they both include substantially more recipes than Shihab’s cookbook-memoir,
making them much more functional as cookbooks. This is particularly true of Janet
Kalush’s cookbook—which contains very little narration comparatively. Both works
take handing down culture to the new generation of Arab Americans as their central purpose.

On a much smaller scale, Kalush and Sawaya undertake a limited form of cultural instruction. Unlike Shihab, this instruction is given in small doses (usually less than a page) and ties in closely to the recipes. Linda Dalal Sawaya focuses on Lebanese practices of growing foods, preparing and serving food while Janet Kalush emphasizes the nutritional value of Lebanese cuisine. Despite the fact that neither author directly addresses neo-Orientalist stereotypes, both women consistently present the Arab World as culturally advanced and relevant, even in the context of the United States.

In particular, Sawaya is interested in showing her audience how resourceful her grandparents and ancestors were in producing their own foods. To this end, she mentions kitchen gardens of vegetables and herbs, which she describes as “typical in the villages of Lebanon” and the common practice of raising chickens: “In the village, every family raised their own chickens because they efficiently consumed kitchen food scraps and consistently converted them into eggs.” She then connects these practices to the recent trend in the US towards organic, environmentally conscious food. “Whenever possible,” Sawaya instructs her readers, “it is best to buy sustainable farm-raised, free-range, organically fed chickens. This is the closest we can come to the good, old days when everything was natural and organic, which is best

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38 Sawaya 115.
for our earth and our health.\textsuperscript{39} By linking the “old world” of Lebanon to progressive movements in the “new world,” Sawaya shows the wisdom and relevance of “traditional” Arab culture to the “modern,” Western world.

In a similar manner, Kalush touts the nutritional benefits of Arab cuisine, highlighting protein rich ingredients and low fat dishes. As with Sawaya, the implication is that the Arab diet has always used the fresh and wholesome foods that have only recently become re-popularized among the American middle class in an otherwise fast-food culture. “Laban,” Kalush writes, “has been called ‘healthful and filling’ food for centuries. It is considered a natural antibiotic and a dietetic for stomach ulcers.”\textsuperscript{40} At another point, Kalush notes that crushed wheat, a “staple in Lebanese cooking is an excellent source of protein and fiber”—both of which have been heavily sought after since the Atkins and South Beach diet frenzies. These and other comments draw a picture of Lebanon as a culturally thriving country with long-held knowledge about food and health.

Aside from what could be called positive cultural instruction, there are also moments of negative cultural instruction in each of these works as well. Although this type of content is overall brief and subsidiary to the tone and goals of the works, they surface occasionally, giving credibility to certain stereotypical views of Arabs. Gender issues seem especially prone to evoke this type of content. Some instances of this include Shihab’s somewhat unflattering depiction of polygamy in “Abu Marian Wants

\textsuperscript{39} Sawaya 115. 
\textsuperscript{40} Janet Kalush, Kibee ‘n’ Spice and Everything Nice: Popular and Easy Recipes for the Lebanese and American Family (Haslett: J. Lorraine, 1999) 38.
a Son,” and Kalush’s paragraph on dance and especially belly-dance in her introduction.

More significant is the subtler undercurrent of teaching about the Arab World’s oldness, timelessness, and traditionalism. This critique applies particularly to Shihab and Sawaya’s cookbook-memoirs, although in different ways. For Sawaya, this message is probably linked to her position as a second-generation immigrant. Her mother, Alice was 16 years old when she left Lebanon with her family in 1926. Alice did not return to Douma until 1988, when she visited with her daughter, Linda. Alice’s first trip to Lebanon took place as an adult, in 1971. Thus, most of Alice’s generational knowledge from her mother or even her grandparents—who joined them in California only five years later—was of an old Lebanon. The timing of these events is quite consequential in light of the dramatic and tumultuous changes Lebanon underwent in the 1970’s and 1980’s as a result of the civil war, Israeli invasions, and sectarian violence. Sawaya does broach this topic in her introduction, saying sadly, “Lebanon in 1971 was lovely . . . No one could have believed that a war was imminent that was to last almost twenty years and irrevocably transform Lebanon.”

41 Shihab 94.
42 Kalush is careful to begin with the less known “dubka” but then devotes the rest of the paragraph to belly dance, which is significant given that the entire introduction consists of nine paragraphs. (x) A second of these nine is about the shift from camel caravans to “modern transport.” (x) These inclusions are significant also because of their placement in a highly edited, four-column summary of Lebanon’s history and culture.
43 Sawaya 18.
44 Sawaya 3.
45 Sawaya 7.
when Sawaya writes about food, she returns to her mother’s and her grandmother’s memories of Lebanon, often referring to it simply as “the old country.” She also uses words like “traditional” frequently, creating the vague impression of age and length. Overall, Sawaya conveys that culture and food in Lebanon are more or less unchanged since the time her grandmother and mother lived there.

Shihab’s message in this regard resembles Sawaya’s, although his means are different. Unlike Sawaya, Shihab is a first generation immigrant with his own memory to draw from. Shihab left his home in Palestine in 1950, shortly after the creation of an Israeli state. Like Sawaya’s mother, Shihab was thus absent for the defining period of Palestinian resistance in the first Intifada. He, too, writes about the changes that occurred in Palestine, during and after his residence there. However, the majority of vignettes present a timeless face to Palestine because of their simplicity and omission of details. Bardenstein categorizes this style as “having a ‘generic,’ unspecific feel.”

In a similar manner to Sawaya, Shihab paints a picture of the Palestine of his youth, the way it was and the way he wishes to remember it. By and large, he puts aside the momentous political changes that took place, even within his first-hand memory, to create a picture of a hospitable, welcoming Palestine where food was consistent and plentiful.

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46 Bardenstein 367.
Delivering culture

Cultural transmission is perhaps one of the strongest human motivators. The impulse to reproduce, to teach children one’s own values and beliefs, to pass down wisdom, number among the world’s most common stories. Immigration complicates this process, adding competition and fear into the mix. For the immigrant’s cultural knowledge is always suspect and open to challenge.

Rochelle Davis addresses transmission and loss in her article, “Language and Loss, Or How to Bark like a Dog and Other Lessons from al-Jahiz.” She includes a telling anecdote from Ahmed Baydoun’s *Bint jibayl, mishigan* in which Baydoun and his sister welcome Lebanese visitors at the Detroit airport. At their arrival, Baydoun’s sister tries to sing a welcome song learned in the old world but cannot remember the words. This act of forgetting takes on a very different meaning in Michigan than it would in Lebanon. As Davis relates: “No one could imagine the sister forgetting the words to the song if she were in Lebanon, because she would still be in her land and the culture of her origin. And even if she did forget it, it might go unnoticed. But here in Dearborn, her forgetting is part of a general feeling of removal or loss.” In other words, the act of forgetting in the new world is infused with existential meaning. To forget language, behaviors, or even a few words from a song, is equated with forgetting

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48 Davis 103.
country, culture and self. Thus, cultural transmission becomes a conscious, deliberate activity to hold on to self.

In spite of all efforts to preserve and pass down culture intact in the United States just as one would in an Arab country, cultural transmission “here” is inescapably different from “there.” There are gaps, substitutions, and adjustments made to fit the market, technological and lifestyle differences in the United States: Mexican cucumbers stand in for balady produce, electric ovens are substituted for the precarious stand-alone double broilers, and food processors are incorporated to save time. Even more significantly, the meaning of the individual act is altered. A young child eating a zait and za’tar sandwich for lunch in Chicago is a different act than if she were to eat that same sandwich in Damascus. Thus, even when the food is identical, the context and content of the act are unmistakably changed.

Changes are visible in many of the cookbook-memoir recipes. These variations highlight how the new world is different from the old. As previously mentioned, the main differences are in availability of certain foods, appliances, and time. In her recipe for “Sweet Breads (Chureck),” for instance, Nasrallah suggests using shredded mozzarella if jibna hilwa is not available. Sawaya offers two sets of instructions for baking “Khubz Marquoq,” for gas and electric stoves. In a similar manner, Kalush assumes her readers only have access to electric stoves and recommends using a heavy baking stone for “Pita Bread.”

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49 Nasrallah 89.
50 Kalush 63.
short-cuts, prefaced by comments like: “I’m including a quicker alternative way to shape these cookies in a log, for those who don’t have time like our mothers and grandmothers did, to make these the traditional way. They still taste great.” Less often, recipes are changed in name and flavor to suit American tastes. Some examples include Nasrallah’s cultural translation of “Laham bi Ajeen” into “Arabian Pizza” or Shihab’s parenthetical title “garbanzo kebab” for falafel. Vegetarian or lower-fat ingredients are sometimes proposed, as in Shihab’s “Kiftah Bil-Tahina”: “The lamb meat may be replaced with beef, or—for the diet conscious—turkey or chicken tenders.”

Perhaps the biggest change of all in cultural knowledge that this food literature represents is in its format: written, rather than oral, recipes with standardized measurements. Many of the authors attest to the fact that their parents and grandparents did not prepare meals with an open cookbook on the counter. Rather, they learned by example, and by a kind of oral tradition, where recipes were passed down from one generation to the next. By the author’s understanding, the act of writing down recipes—and in the process, regularizing and standardizing them—is something that happens “here” and would be unnecessary in their native country. It is a conscious act to remember and to deliver culture.

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51 Sawaya 99.
52 Nasrallah 82.
53 Shihab 26.
54 Shihab 68.
55 Shihab ix; Kalush xiii, Sawaya “About the Fourth Edition;” Nasrallah does write about early Babylonian recipes—although these were usually for god and kings, 21.
Like the anecdote of Baydoun and his sister at the airport, forgetting poses a staggering threat which extends far beyond the specific item lost. Joanna Kadi, in her personal essay “Five Steps to Creating Culture,” writes about the fear and implications of cultural loss this way:

[T]here is a big, big difference between my grandmother and I. The knowledge is inside her; the recipe she needs has been handed down, one generation to the next. She is secure in the knowledge of what to do. I am not. I am foraging for a recipe, a tradition. . . . I am floundering, looking for recipes that let people know the place from which we came and the place where we are now . . . I’m trying to create, I’m trying to sustain my family.”  

Although Kadi starts out talking about the differences between herself and her grandmother in terms of recipes, she ends up talking about something much bigger—identity and survival. In this image, the recorded recipe is a map for migrant Arabs: it directs, reminds, and anchors the Arab American. And most important of all, this secure, memorialized knowledge allows him to survive “here.”

For Joanna Kadi, then, the cookbook is an integral part of the Arab American experience. She imagines her grandmother as secure in cultural knowledge and, if not for moving, she assumes that this knowledge would have been neatly and perfectly handed down to her. This assumption, however, rests on the view that the old world

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stays as it was at the moment of departure, that traditions and even identities are static “there” and only become destabilized in the new world.

Accordingly, the line of recipe transmission in the cookbook-memoirs is sometimes presented as more continuous and seamless than they actually are. The best examples of this feature are in Shihab’s and Sawaya’s texts. Shihab’s case is perhaps the clearest, as sons are not part of the typical food knowledge transmission chain. In fact, as Bardenstein notes, “For him to have written this type of cookbook-memoir ‘back home’ would most likely have seemed outlandish.” 57

The line food knowledge transmission is not immediately clear in Shihab’s A Taste of Palestine. Although he authored the book, there are certain clues that suggest other “experts”—namely, his American wife and his Palestinian mother. From the various clues, Bardenstein comes up with the following likely scenario: “apart from the few recipes he mastered when single, Shihab seems to have largely maintained the traditional role of consumer of the Palestinian dishes whose recipes appear in A Taste of Palestine.” 58 Bardenstein goes on to speculate that Shihab probably consulted his mother for general preparation instructions for each dish. Then, Shihab’s wife, as the introduction suggests, converted these transcriptions into standard measurements. 59 Consequently, the actual chain of transmission is “far more complicated than first seemed to be the case and has largely been submerged from clear view.” 60

57 Bardenstein 371.
58 Bardenstein 373; Shihab ix.
59 Bardenstein 374.
60 Bardenstein 374.
Sawaya, too, attempts to construct a smooth and unbroken line of food knowledge over multiple generations and spanning the old and new world. The overall content of her book depicts these generational and geographical shifts in very optimistic light, with only slight hints at difficulties or ruptures along the way. In Bardenstein’s words, “The normative breaks that can be discerned along the continuum are not lamented of associated with pain; previous worlds are not mourned or dwelt on as sites of loss.”

While it is true that disjuncture occurs in the line of cultural transmission in the United States, it is equally true that interruptions and breaks occur in the old world. In her research on cookbook-memoirs, Bardenstein lays out some “cultural myths” of identity and transmission, two of which are included here:

(1) that disruption (of life, of transmission of food knowledge) is the product of the unnatural displacement of exile, and that, without exile, life and transmission of food traditions would be smooth and continuous, (2) that identities are made complex by exile and are implicitly assumed to have been previously intact, authentic, and unproblematized.

In truth, the idea of perfect and complete transmission of any kind of knowledge is unrealistic. As with other aspects of culture like language and “tradition,” changes

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61 Bardenstein 363.
62 Bardenstein 359.
occur over time and things that seem old may in fact have been introduced recently.\textsuperscript{63}

This is of course applicable in the case of food knowledge also.

Peter Heine proves that cookbooks are not a phenomenon of Arab America only in his article, “The Revival of Traditional Cooking in Modern Arab Cookbooks.” Heine discusses how various political and social changes created a need for cookbooks on Arab cuisine in countries like Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Some of the reasons he cites for this “revivalism” are growing female literacy, foreign labor, economic growth, westernization and a search for authentic Arab identity.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, some Arabs today are actually utilizing cookbooks in a very similar way to Arab Americans. In both cases, cookbooks signal change and the attempt to prove continuity of food knowledge and practices. And yet, this endeavor inevitably creates something new.

It is nevertheless important to acknowledge the presence of these cultural myths—that cultural identity and cultural knowledge are stable and predictable in the old world, only becoming mobile or threatened in the new world. As with Bardenstein, the intention of this analysis is not so much to debunk these myths, but rather to consider whether or how these myths have “played an active role in shaping the


\textsuperscript{64} Peter Heine, “The Revival of Traditional Cooking in Modern Arab Cookbooks,” \textit{A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East}. eds, Richard Tapper and Sami Zubaida (New York: St. Martin, 2000) 143 -151.
configurations of food, memory, gender, and exile”—and especially, identity, in the texts.⁶⁵

_Proving Authority_

Given the common view that cultural identity is weakened by immigration, Arab Americans are constantly asked to prove their Arabness to both hyphenated and unhyphenated Arabs. Culturally identity is no longer assumed to have been uneventfully passed from one hand to another and must therefore be demonstrated repeatedly and in a variety of ways.

For cookbook-memoir authors, the need for proof is magnified. Indeed, they must not only prove their Arabness to their families and friends, but also authority to their readership. As authors of published cookbooks and as cultural instructors, Shihab, Nasrallah, Kalush and Sawaya must show that they have an intimate knowledge of the old world and its food practices. As a result, “proof” emerges as an expressive mode in food writings on the old world—although less central than the modes of cultural instruction and transmission.

One way of gaining authority in their readers’ eyes is by supplying first hand accounts. By doing this, they demonstrate a kind of knowledge that is immediate and “on-the-ground,” not only transmitted. This type of proof can be found in both Shihab’s and Sawaya’s cookbook-memoirs. Although not a strong component of

⁶⁵ Bardenstein 360.
either Nasrallah’s or Kalush’s texts, they do still share their country of origin with the readers, creating legitimacy through association with the old world.

For Shihab, it is not a reach to find first hand material, given that he spent the first portion of his life in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Occupied Territories. His vignettes often include the familiar streets and shops of his old routes. In the chapter entitled “Muslims, Christians and Jews,” Shihab remembers buying “sweet hot milk from a vendor who constantly stirred the boiling milk in a large barrel with a long-handled wooden spoon” for breakfast. In another place, he mentions Nablus’ famous *kinafe* and the distinctive smell of baked goods and spices that emanated from Damascus Gate. These details stand out against the otherwise generalized backdrop of Shihab’s recollections.

More pointed in Shihab’s mode of proof is his witness to Palestinian political and cultural loss since the rise of the state of Israel. In one scene, Shihab visits family’s former home in Nabi Daoud with his son. He finds a Star of David on the door and learns that the house has been converted into a rabbinic school. As he is about to leave, a guard asks him for a donation and Shihab replies, “You have my childhood home and you want more?” Shihab leaves the house, walking through the Old City of Jerusalem, wondering where all the familiar people and vendors have gone.

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66 Shihab 9.
67 Shihab 35.
68 Shihab 10.
69 Shihab 104.
This story of return goes beyond Shihab’s need to prove to his audience his authoritative knowledge about cooking or even Palestine. As a Palestinian, he must do something further—he must also bear witness to Palestinian tragedy, and it’s “scenes of erasure.”\textsuperscript{70} Shihab’s work separates itself from the others in this aspect, for none of the other authors have to prove that their national identity or homeland exists. Shihab, however, cannot take for granted that his audience already believes in a thing called Palestine or Palestinian identity. Thus, in Shihab’s mode of proof, he bears witness to the reality of an identity larger than his own.

Unlike Shihab, Sawaya’s lived experience in the old world is somewhat limited. However, she is careful to specify all of her trips to Beirut in order to furnish proof of her first-hand knowledge of Lebanon. Some of her activities there include visiting olive groves and vineyards, tasting ‘Ein il Fou’a’s natural spring water and eating Marie Talalai’s \textit{tannour} bread.\textsuperscript{71} Sawaya also lists the fruits in season during her visits. Although her accounts of these visits are relatively brief, Sawaya’s selection of details helps to solidify her authority as an Arab American writer who has seen her home country and tasted its fruits.

A second form of proof is expertise—whether cultural, historical or about food and nutrition. Nasrallah certainly uses this kind of proof, as does Kalush. For Nasrallah, her expertise is in the history of Iraqi cuisine, dating back to 6000 BC. She

\textsuperscript{70} phrase borrowed from Ted Swedenburg, Memories of Revolt: the 1936-1939 Rebellion and the Palestinian National Past (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995)

\textsuperscript{71} Sawaya 19-20.
provides far more details than the average cook would expect, turning her cookbook–memoir into a virtual textbook. Along with facts about cooking and the historical record at various periods, Nasrallah’s cookbook-memoir also contains translated letters, poems and visual artifacts. If any of these fail to convince, her bibliography and professional achievements are listed at the end. All of these components seal Nasrallah’s authority to write and publish Delights from the Garden of Eden.

Although in a less conspicuous manner, Kalush also proves her authority through expertise. Her cookbook-memoir does not have the kind of textbook appeal of Nasrallah’s work, however, but she supplies many helpful tips to her readers about preparation, presentation and nutrition. Most noticeably, her recipes detail the nutritional values of the food in terms of fat (saturated and total), cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, dietary fiber, and protein as well as the total number of calories per serving. The front cover of Kibee ‘n’ Spice and Everything Nice even advertises this feature. This inclusion proves Kalush’s knowledge of food and legitimizes her as cook and writer.

In a final type of proof, all authors demonstrate their authority through their personal experiences with food. Sawaya’s instruction on how to pick a ripe olive is a notable example of this kind of proof. She writes, “When olives are deep, rich, and purple-black in color, they are ripe for picking and processing without scoring . . .”\(^{72}\) It is unusual that she chose to describe the process of picking and preserving olives, given how few of her readers will ever need this information. Thus, the paragraph on

\(^{72}\) Sawaya 27.
olive picking only finds a place in her cookbook because of the need for proof. Shihab proves his experience in the kitchen in “A Single Man’s Food,” though the dishes in this section are more basic than the average fare. Nasrallah describes many childhood memories of watching her mother, friends and even the neighborhood baker prepare food while she watched, demonstrating her life-long fascination with food. Kalush remembers watching her grandmother toss bread dough into the air, and then eating it with her siblings.

As a mode, proof reveals a kind of identity anxiety. For if the authors did not embody a hyphenated identity, their “Arabness” would be assumed. Short of a dramatic casting off of culture, no one would question their authority to transmit cultural knowledge. Once in the US—and especially if born in the US, these authors find that their cultural identity can no longer be taken for granted.

Conclusion

Overall, the authors of the old world food literature write from a defensive posture. At first glance, this posture is not immediately visible due to the optimistic outlook most of the authors espouse. Indeed, they seem to be generally hopeful about Americans’ interest and reception of their texts. Nonetheless, defensiveness is a persistent undercurrent in their texts. The old world food authors defend richness and

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73 Shihab 71-78.
74 Kalush 54.
integrity of Arab culture to mainstream American audiences. Next, they try to defend against cultural erosion through passing down food knowledge to the next generation of Arab Americans. Lastly, they defend their right to represent and transmit Arab culture through various proofs.

Thus, despite the cheerful outlook in these works, two beliefs about Arab American identity and position in the world are clear. First, the authors conceive of Arab cultural identity as existing in its complete and unpolluted form only in the context of the old world. Upon departure, identities become fickle and can only be preserved through conscious, careful work. The authors seem to believe that cultural transmission, for example, must be a conscious activity: they cannot assume that the next generation will “pick things up” naturally. When the authors record regional recipes they attest to the fear that something might be forgotten along the way. Ironically, the authors are willing to make changes to cultural practices and food knowledge for the sake of security. The cookbook-memoirs attest to this in more than one way, but most notably in the shift from oral to written transmission of food knowledge.

A second belief that emerges from old world literature is that the new world is a dangerous and potentially hostile place for the fragile Arab American identity to develop. The many negative, stereotypical depictions of Arabs make this situation even more tenuous. It thus presents both the danger of forgetting / loosing identity and of internalizing cultural inferiority. Despite this belief, old world literature food writers do not advocate cultural isolation. Instead, they seek to increase awareness of
and sensitivity towards Arabs through food knowledge, personal and culinary histories.

In this way, they hope to create a “safer” society for future Arab Americans.
Despite the importance of the old world to Arab American literature, the new world is the primary setting for the majority of Arab American food writings. Even though the old world is depicted as the original source of authentic identity, “here” is the place where that identity is worked out. Moreover, the Arab world—and the imagined “pure” Arab identity—is still present in this negotiation but never simply as itself. Rather, the old world and the “old Arab” exist in constant encounter and reference to the new life and the options it presents. Thus, the crisis and content of Arab American identity occur in the United States. For although the old world continues to exist as a permanent lost and sought after homeland, the new world is the physical location of home, the present, and the hoped for future.

Unlike the literature on the old world, food literature in the new world is primarily made up of fiction and poetry. The narratives are therefore devised rather than recalled. In addition, the texts are exploratory rather than didactic in purpose. In general, new world food literature avoids moralistic teachings and neatly packaged answers. Instead, these texts explore the critical moment of encounter between Arab and American, the breakdown and re-assumption of identities.

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75 Although Abu-Jaber’s cookbook-memoir is the only specifically autobiographical work in this section, several of the poems studied here may be grounded in personal experiences and circumstances.
The only exception to this divide in literary genres between old and new world food writings is Diana Abu-Jaber’s cookbook-memoir, *The Language of Baklava*. Although her memoirs span both worlds, this piece most properly belongs with the new world writings for several reasons. Firstly, the majority of her life and the book’s narration take place in the United States. Jordan is primarily her father’s realm. That said, she does spend a short period of childhood there as well as several years as an adult, in an effort to reconnect to her ancestral home and write a novel. Nonetheless, her experiences in Jordan are bound up with her father’s childhood, entrepreneurial enterprises and family ties and feuds. Second and more critical is the difference between Abu-Jaber’s cookbook-memoir and the other old world writings examined here in intention and voice. By and large, Abu-Jaber aims to describe the experience of being simultaneously Arab and American, exploring her own identity formation with all of its contradictions and disappointments. Unlike the other cookbook-memoirs studied, her driving goal is neither to remember, teach, nor transmit knowledge of the world. Instead, Abu-Jaber is interested in telling a story that will push the limits of Arab American identity constructs. As she commented during an interview, “I am very interested in the matrix of stories that we whisper to each other, things we don’t want to show the outside world, and how that creates the inside of a culture. I feel like those kinds of secrets and that kind of closing down is part of what keeps the Arab and American worlds separate . . .”

Therefore, while portions of her

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book describe and take place in the old world, in a larger sense, her cookbook-memoir
belongs with the new world writings.

Like the literature of the old world, new world food literature aspires to represent self. Excepting Abu-Jaber’s memoirs, the representations should not be read literarily or as autobiography. Nonetheless, through creative expression, these authors equally seek to tell a true story of Arab American experience and identity. They, too, speak into a space that is not empty, but rather crowded with negative, exoticized and exceptionalized images of Arabs. Like Sawaya, Shihab, Kalush and Nasrallah, these new world authors endeavor to provide competitive and ultimately authentic alternatives to the existing view.

In this act of self-representation, food stands for Arab American identity and its development. To begin with, food symbolizes the moment of understanding that something is not quite right—something is missing or in the “wrong” place. In other words, food creates an experience of difference in the characters’ lives, separating them from white Americans. Secondly, food stands for Arab American identity, itself. *Falafel* and cardamom, among other foods, mark characters as Arab in both public and private spaces. The specific content of this identity is often vague and muddled, however: sometimes Arab and Arab-American are conflated, or Pan-Arabness is implied out of Levantine references. In a third theme, food represents an Arab American resistance to majority American culture. In this, the authors resist a monolithic American identity, and a fast-food, capitalist, individualistic lifestyle. Finally, food symbolizes the act of surviving and staying in the United States.
Through buying, cooking and planting, Arab Americans remake the old world in the new home.

*Food as a moment of Difference*

For most people, cultural identity is not something understood at birth, but rather develops slowly through various psychological processes. While it is not the purpose of this paper to delve into the science of that development, it is nonetheless important to consider how this dawning awareness comes about for Arab Americans—or at the very least, how it is perceived and remembered to have happened. In both the creative and autobiographical works considered here, food surfaces as an impetus to understanding cultural divides. In particular, this occurs when Arab Americans (real or imagined) stand out in some way because of their food. Smells, ingredients and preparation practices which seemed natural to the young Arab American heroes and heroines in the private spaces of home, suddenly become strange when brought into public view. These characters labor to understand the categories of exclusion, sometimes landing on cultural shame.

This theme is more likely to occur in the perspective of second or later generation immigrants, whose identities form within the paradigm of minority-majority culture, where difference is synonymous with marginalization. The moment of difference which food brings about also sometimes holds out the hope of belonging—especially with other persons who are also marginalized in some way.
In Diana Abu-Jaber’s The Language of Baklava, the theme of food as difference occurs frequently. As the young Abu-Jaber tries to find her place in a world made up of pancakes and *kefta*, food is a catalyst to self-understanding. In general, these revelations come through negative experiences—not having the right kinds of likes and dislikes, or behaving in ways that break the rules of majority culture. Unlike some of the more celebratory usages of food, in these scenes, food is a moment of discomfort and misfitting.

One such moment in Abu-Jaber’s memoirs occurs during a family barbecue in Syracuse, New York. Her family has recently returned from Jordan and she remembers trying to find her bearings again, to remember how to be American. Although barbecuing chicken should be an innocuous activity in the U.S., small differences take the Abu-Jaber family off the path of culturally sanctioned behavior. “For example, the neighbors don’t barbecue in their front yard. That is apparently what the backyard is for,” Abu-Jaber writes. She only understands this, however, when the neighbors walk by, showing their shock and distaste at the sight of the joyful lawn picnic. By the time the unfriendly exchange is over, the lunch is ruined for Diana. Without being able to articulate why, the bright promise of the new neighborhood sinks away from her: “I get the feeling that starts somewhere at the center of my chest, as heavy as an iron ingot, a bit like fear or sadness or anger, but none of these exactly . . . I look up at the neighborhood and the mist has cleared. All

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the mean, cheaply framed windows are gaping at us, the sky empty as a gasp.”

Although Abu-Jaber does not fully understand the meaning of the event at the time, it is a moment she refers back to later in life and recognizes as formative. Surprisingly, grilled chicken brings about this oddly defining moment. Abu-Jaber includes the recipe for this provocative dish, nicknaming it “‘Distract the Neighbors’ Grilled Chicken.”

In the same chapter, “A House and a Yard,” there is a second moment of difference that arises through food. Abu-Jaber visits some friendlier neighbors, Sally Holmes and her family, whom Bud has dubbed “real Americans.” Mrs. Holmes carries out a tray of canned chocolate puddings for the girls as they are playing with a Ouija board in the living room. Abu-Jaber is mixed with revolt and fascination by the snack, which she describes as tasting “like burnt plastic” and the accompanying “gummy eggnog” which quivers in her glass. Watching her friend eagerly scrape the tin, Abu-Jaber realizes her distaste for these dessert items is not “normal.” She recalls thinking to herself, “This is American food, I tell myself. I don’t like it, I think, because I’ve somehow forgotten it. I must remember.” Abu-Jaber does not ascribe her tastes in food as personal only but rather, perceives how belonging is related to liking and disliking the right things. Disliking the pudding puts her “Americanness”

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78 Abu-Jaber 81.
79 Abu-Jaber 79.
80 Abu-Jaber 73.
81 Abu-Jaber 73.
82 Abu-Jaber 73.
on shaky ground. Therefore, in order to be a “real American,” Abu-Jaber must remember how to like this trembling dish.

The question of what constitutes normal also presents itself as subtext in Nathalie Handal’s poem, “El Amuerzo de Tia Habiba.” Although the new world in this poem is Mexico, not the United States, the family depicted embodies a similar mixing of languages and foods. The poem begins when the speaker wakes up in the morning to her Tia Habiba’s diverse cooking: “tamalitos, lamb, hummos, laban and grape leaves.” The names of relatives who visit that day and the cities they come from vary from English to Spanish and Arabic, from Mexico to “the holy land.”

The day which Handal describes in this poem is a much more positive image of cultural mixing than that of the Abu-Jaber’s encounter with the neighbors over barbequed chicken or even her visit with the Holmes. However, Handal’s poem still includes the moment of difference—a moment of realizing that things are somehow not as they ought or are expected to be:

I stand

at the top of the staircase looking

at those people below as if I were

on the Mount of Olives looking

at the Old City, and I wonder

how these people got here

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so far from the Mediterranean sea

The sadness in the speaker’s voice has more to do with exile and all the other types of loss that are part of that Palestinian inheritance than with cultural misfitting. However, it is still a moment of recognizing difference and finding identities altered such that they might no longer easily belong to any single group. Handal ends her poem on this reflective note: “I start going down the stairs, hear/ them say, Habibti, que tal? / and know that all has changed.”

Lugman’s reaction to his family’s and other Arabs’ differences from other Americans in Nabeel Abraham’s “The Temptation of Lugman Abdallah” is much more visceral than the feelings of either Handal’s speaker or Abu-Jaber’s adolescent self. This piece is a coming-of-age story of an adolescent Arab American boy. It opens with an ordinary day of delivering newspapers in Detroit when a customer’s daughter, Ann, opens the door dressed in a negligee. Lugman quickly becomes infatuated with Ann and fantasizes about having a sexual encounter with her—a fantasy he never realizes.

In contrast to his attraction to Ann, Arab girls repulse Lugman. To him, the worst thing to be in life is a “boater.” He is uninterested in Arab and Arab American women because they are branded for Lugman as boaters in their daily habits, odors and cooking. As the narrator expounds, “He was secretly embarrassed, even repelled, by the Arab girls in his circumscribed world . . . They came off as boaters, even when they

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84 Handal 31, l. 20-26.
85 Handal 31, l. 33.
were born in the U.S.A. Their houses smelled funny. The places and the people seemed permanently wrapped in a mélange of cooking odors—fried onions, garlic, curry, and the pungent odor of mutton.” To Lugman, the scent of Arab cooking is an unbearable marker of difference, otherness, and ultimately a roadblock to his goal of becoming a “cool,” “local,” “Amrekan.”

Despite the cultural shame that Arab foods stir up in Lugman, he draws upon his knowledge of food to make connections with his Mexican American love interest. In other words, although food is a moment of unhappy difference for Lugman, it is also a moment of expected connection and similarity with other 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants. In his first conversation with Ann, Lugman returns to food repeatedly. For example, he compliments Ann’s mother’s baking, adding that: “Fewer and fewer women bake anymore.”

When this does not inspire much enthusiasm from Ann, Lugman moves on to the nuances of tea with milk. “In my house we drink tea with milk but that is because my parents once lived under British rule, and that’s what the British do. Americans tend to put milk in their coffee, not in their tea.” Although Lugman does not successfully find common ground with Ann through this line of discussion, his inclusion of food conversation confirms the relationship of food and difference.

87 Abraham 223.
88 Abraham 228.
89 Abraham 229.
Intuitively, Lugman understands that Ann, too, is “different” from other Americans and thus expects her to relate to his knowledge of tea and baking.

For Lugman, the speaker in Handal’s poem, and young Abu-Jaber, food is a moment of uncomfortable difference. All of them wish for the warmth and comfort of similarity rather than difference; they yearn for belonging instead of exclusion. Whether through falling in love or eating with family, food is an impetus for questioning personal identity. In the case of Abu-Jaber and Handal’s speaker, food eventually cements their Arab—albeit hyphenated or displaced—identity. Lugman, does not reach this settling point in the story, although he does move from cultural disassociation to drawing from the foods and experiences of his own Arab American familial and cultural knowledge.

The theme of food as a moment of difference also lays bare the shifted meaning of Arab food “here.” As discussed earlier, the act of cooking or eating Arab foods is different “here” than “there.” Undoubtedly, in these three works, all three of the hyphenated Arab characters can attest to this fact. Consequently, something as common as cooking onions or grilling chicken becomes a personally defining moment.

Food as a marker of Arab American Identity

In a more tangible manner, food stands out in much of Arab American literature as a marker of Arab identity. As with the cookbook-memoirs, the version of Arab presented is an American one, although this differentiation is not always made.
Likewise, the foods employed as identity symbols are often Levantine foods, even when the authors intend to indicate an inclusive cultural, rather than national heritage.

In contrast to the theme of food as a moment of difference, writings on this theme are generally celebratory. They embrace difference, proudly broadcasting Arab identity as strong, rich and deeply rooted in history. Sadness still enters these narratives, however, even in the midst of celebration. This sadness reflects the tragedies of Arab history—legacies of colonization and occupation—as well as those of Arabs in America.

Although occurring within a creative framework, the theme of food as a marker of Arab American identity in some ways resembles the cultural instruction mode of writing in old world food literature. By illusion and metaphor, the poems and short stories with this theme aim to instruct an American public on the meaning of “Arab.” Like the old world literature, they reject stereotypical representations, with added attention to gender issues. However, they also go beyond the discourse of cultural instruction, investigating the internalization of stereotypes and the tensions and typecasting that take place between Arabs. Significantly, they present Arabs, with all their markers, as regular people with universally relatable experiences.

Suheir Hammad’s book of poetry, ZaatarDiva, is a particularly strong example of the use of food as a marker of Arab American identity. As the title suggests, this collection draws from the vocabulary of Arab cuisine as well as the music and rhythm of the American street. The volume begins with the poem “Bag of Zaatar,” which serves as an introduction to both the collection and the poet. In this poem the narrator
describes herself metaphorically though the contents of a brown paper bag. The images include objects that reflect the personal features of her life—“velvet / slippers for a china / doll”—as well as images that point to her Arab identity. The majority of this second category of images is foods, simply listed by name: “sumac,” “sesame,” “sweet oils,” and “honey.” In contrast to the personal objects, the Arab foods she mentions lack detail and individuality—indeed, similar illusions occur repeatedly in other Arab American writings. Consequently, the relatively generic foods demonstrate belonging to an Arab community.

Even as she consciously identifies herself as Arab, the poem also places Hammad in an American framework. On a structural level, the poem, like all other Arab American works, is written in English. The foods, too, are named in English. The form of the poem is free verse and draws from an American artistic heritage of beatniks and hip-hop. The very need to identify one’s self as an Arab only exists outside of the Arab World, in a place where people do not already know what Arabs look like. Hammad is not unaware of these realities and that is perhaps why in this work, as well as many others, she actively engages with the language, rhythms and

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91 Hammad, 17, l. 8
92 Hammad 17, l. 18.
93 Hammad 17, l. 28.
94 Hammad 17, l. 29.
95 see Hammad 17, l. 19: “hair lots of hair”
symbols of other minorities in the United States. To this end, Hammad tosses west African “cassava leaves” into the mix of Arab foods in her brown paper bag.\textsuperscript{96}

Lisa Suhair Majaj’s poem “Claims” fits into the same vein of writing as Hammad’s “Bag of Zaatar.” It, too, is a proud declaration by an Arab woman of her identity. It also uses food references to assert that identity of belonging. What differentiates Majaj’s poem, however, from Hammad’s is its ardent political message that very nearly approximates didacticism.

“Claims” is a poem that confronts orientalism, racism and stereotyping head-on. The first three stanzas of the poem focus on dispelling myths, paralleling the approach of the old world literature. “I am neither harem’s promise / nor desire’s fulfillment,” Majaj writes, in response to the exotic representation of Arab women.\textsuperscript{97} “I am not a shapeless peasant / trailing children like flies;” begins the second stanza, which contests the notion of Arab primitivism and female oppression.\textsuperscript{98} “I am not a camel jockey, sand nigger, terrorist” Majaj declares in response to the insults launched at Arab Americans.\textsuperscript{99} In the space of a few stanzas, Majaj deconstructs the whole offensive profile of an Arab as it exists in popular American culture and media.

Having established what an Arab is not, in the fourth stanza, Majaj begins her positive claims. The language she chooses for her cultural self-portrait is highly agrarian, shifting from the human to the natural world. “I am the laboring farmwife /

\textsuperscript{96} Hammad 17, l. 15
\textsuperscript{97} Lisa Suhair Majaj, “Claims,” Food for our Grandmothers 84, l. 7-8.
\textsuperscript{98} Majaj, Food for our Grandmothers 84, l. 9-10.
\textsuperscript{99} Majaj, Food for our Grandmothers 85, l. 17.
whose cracked hands claim this soil” Majaj writes. Before long, the images move to the sustaining foods the land yields: “I am the wheat stalk, and I am / the olive.”

Although there are few other explicit food references in her poem, these two crops are critical to her depiction of herself, for they locate her within a larger Arab narrative and symbolic landscape. Olives and especially olive oil are an integral part of every Arab meal. Moreover, olive trees often stand for Palestine. Farming, too, is a political symbol of a nationalist past when Palestinians owned and cared for the lands from which they have since been dispossessed. In other words, foods, among other images, mark Majaj as a proud Arab woman. She selects her metaphors carefully, tossing aside the perennial veil in favor of a peasant’s clothes. She draws from Palestinian nationalist rhetoric to create an image of empowered, participatory womanhood.

Who exactly Majaj is representing in this poem is somewhat hard to nail down. The stereotypes she takes on in the first half of the poem are directed at all Arabs—albeit, with special attention to those targeting Arab women. The third stanza is slightly more specific, honing in on American prejudices towards Arab Americans post 9/11. However, when Majaj describes the “real” Arab woman, her images are slightly less encompassing. Although there are multiple levels of meaning, the bulk of the fourth and fifth stanzas make claims that have preceding and localized meanings in a Palestinian context. The writer’s “blacked-out words” indicate Palestine’s censored

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100 Majaj, *Food for our Grandmothers* 85, l. 29-30.
101 Majaj, *Food for our Grandmothers* 85, l. 37-38.
history. Similarly, “I am the lost one who flees and the lost one returning” suggests a Palestinian discourse of exile and return. Even the olives have a specialized signification in light of the recent memory of the Israeli military’s destruction of ancient Palestinian olive groves. The final verse and ending couplet return to more inclusive language by and large, excepting the phrase “opposite banks of a river” which cannot be read without evoking the East and West banks of the Jordan River. As a result, this poem is likely less resonant with non-Palestinian Arabs, as it imperfectly claims them.

Mohja Kahf is more deliberate about differentiating between the types of Arabs she represents in “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaquah, Iowa.” In fact, she plays off the stereotypes that exist between Arabs and Arab Americans, using food to both separate and draw them together. Food, here, marks not merely a broad Arab identity but multiple types of Arab identity and even degrees of Arabness.

In short, Kahf’s story is about Dr. Rana Rashid, an Arab American nuclear physicist, who volunteers to translate from Arabic to English at a battered women’s shelter. Through her volunteer work, Rana meets Mzayyan, a first generation immigrant with an abusive husband. Dr. Rashid grows progressively frustrated with Mzayyan as she fails to either leave or press charges against her husband. At the end, in a surprising turn of events, Mzayyan finds her own way out of her unhappy marriage by turning her husband into the INF and taking over his Wah-Wah Mart. Ultimately, this

102 Majaj, Food for our Grandmothers 85, l. 31.
103 Majaj, Food for our Grandmothers 85, l. 33-34
104 Majaj, Food for our Grandmothers 86, l. 48.
story turns expectation on its head, challenging Dr. Rashid’s and perhaps the audience’s definition of empowered versus victimized womanhood.

Kahf uses food in this story in comical and yet also insightful ways. Effectively, food is the running ironic commentary throughout the text, as well as an indispensable means of character development. For example, Kahf introduces Dr. Rana Rashid and her husband, Emad, in this way: “They were not the huddled masses of the Greater Jersey City Mosque, reeking of incense and henna . . . and jabbing their fingers at the waiter and asking, ‘Is there pig in this dish? Is there pig in that dish?’”

By removing them from halal dietary concerns, Kahf distances these two characters from both the point of immigration and an authentic Arab culture. As the narrator comments, “Dr Rashid and her husband were the only Arabs, and they weren’t Arab. They were Arab-American. They hyphen said that they had been here a while.”

It is interesting that the narrator’s assessment of the Rashid’s cultural-ethnic identity echoes the identity perceptions found in much of the cooking literature—essentially, that true, unadulterated Arab identity can only be found in the old world. By extension, the farther a person is from home, the less Arab she is. To put it in crude terms, this view represents Arab and American as oppositional points on a continuum, with definite valorization attached to each end. Arab American is all the space in the middle, between “authentic” and “sell out.” The only way to stave off identity erosion after immigration, it would seem, is to retain and reiterate the old world’s practices—in

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105 Mohja Kahf, “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaqua, Iowa,” Dinarzad’s Children 137.
106 Kahf 137.
their shape and form at the point of departure. As already seen, many authors uphold food as one of the more vital old world traditions to sustain. Forgetting how to make *bisteeya* is to approach “American” without a hyphen.

The current of food as not only a marker of Arab identity, but of degrees of Arab identity, continues throughout “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaquah, Iowa”—although, not without a measure of sarcasm. Joseph and Jocelyn Altonjay are depicted as even less Arab than the Rashids using the same food standard. As Kahf describes them, the Altonjays are “so many generations removed from the slightest hint of Arabic accent of whiff of cardamom, that no one would noticed if you dropped the ‘Arab.’”\(^{107}\) Although not the only marker, cardamom stands out strongly in this judgment.

Mzayyan, the Arab immigrant Rana meets during her volunteer work at the women’s shelter, starkly contrast the Rashids and the Altonjays. She has only been in the United States for a short period and is fully Arab. One proof of this is her delicious spiced chicken, which she brings into the shelter on an inviting platter. After everyone has eaten, Mzayyan sends some of the food home with Rana. When Rana’s husband, Emad, tastes the spiced chicken with “its juices dripping over heaps of steaming rice,” he is full of compliments.\(^{108}\) Rana, however, quickly becomes irritated with his obvious enthusiasm for the food. She angrily retorts: “You want me to give up nuclear

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\(^{107}\) Kahf 143.
\(^{108}\) Kahf 144.
physics and cook for you?"  Rana’s response displays her stereotypes towards the Mzayyan and the world she comes from. Her question implies that a woman can either be a good cook or a professional, not both. But there is still more to her anger that also relates to identity markings. In some way, Rana is insecure about herself, as an Arab woman because she either does not have the time or the ability to cook like Mzayyan.

At the end of the day, Kahf plays with our expectations in some areas but not in others. She certainly contests the notion that Arab women are agentless victims or that domesticity is in any way related to a submissive attitude. Mzayyan rids herself of her husband and converts his property titles to her own name. She goes on to become an entrepreneur, selling her famous spiced chicken first at the mart and then through new franchises. At the same time, Kahf leaves intact certain identity constructs. Her characters are defined by their Arab food knowledge and behaviors, or lack thereof. She subtly suggests that cultural identity can be lost, if not guarded and ritualized. Indeed, this story could even be read as a cautionary tale for Arab Americans heading the wrong way.

Like Kahf, Evelyn Shakir uses food in unexpected ways to mark her characters’ Arab identities in her short story, “Oh Lebanon.” In brief, this story gives a section of a British / American Arab woman’s life, mostly through the lens of her relationships. The heroine is of British and Lebanese descent and does not arrive to the United States until her adult years. She moves to Lebanon with her father after her mother’s death and then to the United States for college. Her story is marked by tumultuous

\[109\] Kahf 148.
relationships—two failed marriages as well as other fruitless romantic pursuits—that drive her to seek out professional relationship guidance. Through a matchmaking agency, the heroine meets an Arab American who was raised without a lot of cultural knowledge and now wishes to return to his roots and assert an Arab identity. What follows is an unusual meeting of cultural identities—neither one of which is “complete” nor self-evident. On the one hand, the heroine is fluent in Arabic, with a first-hand knowledge of Lebanese culture. Yet, she feels unsure of acceptance from other Arabs because of her unorthodox relational past. Her date, on the other hand, enthusiastically embraces his Arab heritage while not knowing so much as the word “habibi.”

Shakir marks Arab identity in this story also through food, albeit in surprising ways. As with Majaj’s poem “Claims,” Shakir uses food to define people not merely through their individuality but through their membership in a broader Arab identity. Shakir’s heroine is obviously conflicted about her desire to belong and willingness to subscribe to Arab cultural mores—as embodied in her family standards for love and marriage. Yet, when the agency unexpectedly matches her to a man of Arab descent, she begins to imagine her family welcoming her back into their fold. Although initially hesitant to date an Arab man, she becomes excited by the possibility of reconciliation with her family through an acceptable marriage. Her daydream implies, however, a desire to be claimed and accepted, not only by her family, but also by some larger Arab community and the language of this acceptance is Arabic food. As the

narrator reveals, Shakir’s troubled protagonist envisions, “long tables laden with food. Maaza, first, of every sort—hummus and baba ghanouj and tabbouleh, olives, sprigs of green thyme, picked eggplant; then dishes of chicken with rice, rolled grape leaves, and kibbee . . .”11 The description of the grand feast continues through desert and coffee, ending with her relatives embracing her imaginary husband: “‘You are one of us,’ they would say, reclaiming her at the same time.”112 On a micro level, the food stands for her father’s forgiveness and coveted approval. On a larger scale, though, the food-laden table represents a homecoming; a definitive space of belonging.

Shakir contributes to the collective feeling of this portrayal by leaving her main character nameless. Hence, the heroine becomes a blank screen on which many different women may be projected. Her namelessness, like the food allusions, is an act of defining identity by membership rather than distinctiveness from a group. In a manner similar to Kahf, Shakir fights stereotypical renderings of Arab women by casting her free-spirited, sexually unconventional heroine as every Arab woman.

It is difficult to say how or whether Shakir differentiates between Arab and Arab American in “Oh Lebanon.” She certainly does not present any clear identity chart as that laid out in Kahf’s “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaquah, Iowa.” The question of what it means to be Arab is inherently confusing in Shakir’s story. In fact, no ideal authentic prototypes emerge from this narrative. The heroine does not take on old world practices to ensure her cultural safety; in fact she refuses several of

111 Shakir 64.
112 Shakir 64.
them. Early on in her blind date with the Arab American man, she becomes wary that he may have preconceptions about her, based on her identity as an Arab woman from the old country. She asks him defiantly, “You won’t expect me to roll grape leaves or pickle turnips?” Still anxious, she lays out: “Of course I want children . . . But . . . it doesn’t follow that I have to tell them the folk tales my father told me about Jeha the fool, or teach them how to dance three kinds of *dabki*, or how to roll out Arabic bread.” So, here the reader has before him a woman of mixed Arab and British parentage and questionable moral behaviors, who is even unsure if she can marry an Arab man. Still, Shakir marks this character as Arab. Also before the reader is a man who strongly identifies as Arab, wishes to marry an Arab woman but is without cultural knowledge, even of food. Notwithstanding his cultural ignorance, Shakir also presents him as legitimately Arab. Ultimately, Shakir is not interested in providing pat definitions for the categories of “Arab” and “Arab American”. Rather, she shows how these boundaries are blurred and difficult to work out and how, confused as they are, this man and woman can still belong.

Food as a marker of Arab or Arab American identity is an unmistakable theme in new world food literature. Its central aim is to proudly claim and assert Arabness. In the process, food writings in this theme outline the shape of Arab American identity, replacing the many representations of Arabs by non-Arabs with a self-portraiture. Unfortunately, this delineation runs into problems in establishing inclusive food

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113 Shakir 69.
114 Shakir 70.
imagery that reflect all the regional differences of Arab cuisine. As a result, many poems fall short of their goal of standing for all Arab American men and women, reducing the diversity of the Arab world to their own specific national heritage.

Furthermore, this literature reveals great ambivalence over the meaning of Arab American in relation to Arab. Some authors do not distinguish at all between the two categories, treating them as interchangeable. Others use food to measure Arab identity, sometimes morphing into a new economy of exclusion.

*Food as resistance*

In addition to marking Arab/Arab American identities, food literature on the new world delves into the shape of Arab American lives. Even in the midst of invisibility and discrimination, Arab Americans must go on with their daily activities. Food surfaces once more in the narratives, not making existential proclamations but resisting—slowly, pragmatically, even at times invisibly—a dominant monolithic white North American culture. Food tries to create space in an “Americaness” of sameness for difference on a general level, as well as Arabness in all its specificity. In particular, these writings resist a culture of diets and fast food, anonymous neighbors and casual Zionism. The theme of food as resistance to a hegemonic American culture most directly answers the charge that food literature is apolitical and accommodationist.
Turning first to diets, all the rich descriptions of bountiful food and delicious recipes without any fat skimmed off in Abu-Jaber’s food memoir are themselves a strong comment on an American culture obsessed with diets and body image. The juxtaposition of Bud’s joyful cooking with the world outside his kitchen was not lost on Abu-Jaber in her teenage years. She recalls the number of “American”—meaning white American—girls in her class that were on diets, saying, “I first learn about this trend from my friend Kimberly, who is already so narrow and featureless that her skinny jeans barely cling to her hips.”

Abu-Jaber’s comment makes plain her rejection of American food values even at a time when many young American girls are swept up in the tide of unhealthy food behaviors. Abu-Jaber is neither tempted to change her own eating nor impressed by her friend’s weight loss achievements. Abu-Jaber’s “immigrant kid friends” echo her personal perspective. They see the potential food possesses for understanding their own and other cultures. They are also able to enjoy the sensual pleasures of good food without the associated anxiety of weight gain that exists for many American women. As Abu-Jaber explains, “Most of us have parents from countries where a certain lushness is considered alluring in a woman. We’ve grown up in houses redolent with the foods of other places. We cook experimentally at one another’s houses . . .”

115 Abu-Jaber 160.
116 Abu-Jaber 161. Note: Abu-Jaber distinguishes between “immigrant kid friends” and “American friends” in this section.
117 Abu-Jaber 161.
Abu-Jaber’s attitude towards dieting is a form of resistance. She refuses to change her eating habits in order to squeeze into a smaller clothing size. Not only does Abu-Jaber reject the unhealthy mental and physical effects of constant dieting but also an American model of beauty and acceptability in women. This model keeps women small and hungry. In contrast, Abu-Jaber and her “immigrant kid friends” espouse a view in which women are not afraid to be large and full.

Hammad similarly rejects the Western model of womanhood as petite and calorie-conscious. For her, the ideal woman is like baklava—layered, sweet, nourishing—as spelled out in her poem “mama sweet baklava.” Comparing a woman to this rich treat is immediately a departure from an American model. As quickly seen, exercise and dieting are in no way a part of this portrait. Instead, Hammad focuses on “mama’s” strength: “she is baklava / back bone strong foundation,”118 “her center / pistachio walnut crushed / years of rough pounded heart”119 These lines quickly dismiss the American dieting model, stressing instead the importance of fortitude in women, especially for Arab and Arab American women.

In fact, much of Hammad’s poem is political narrative where “mama” resists oppression through direct (political activism) and indirect (domestic labor) means. As a mother, she feeds and sustains her family—literally and figuratively. In the metaphor of baklava, she is handed out to guests and to her children as a gift of love: “cutting

118 Suheir Hammad, “mama sweet baklava,” 33, l. 4-5.
precise like arched / eyebrows and enough / for everyone." Moreover, she sustains them through cultural preservation, passing down her recipes to her children:

her recipe old and passed
down through word of
hand creating and sustaining
substantial delicious

This knowledge is "substantial" and gives them the "food" they need to survive in difficult times.

Finally, "mama" is a political activist, helping the refugees and orphaned children. Her many layers warm and shelter them from the approaching danger or night In all these actions, the mother is integral to her family and country’s survival; she is “nation woman.”

Like many other food literature works, this poem is immersed in Palestinian imagery. Although more general readings are possible, it is more precisely about the fate of Palestine and the role of the exiled Palestinian woman in the Palestinian resistance movement. Preserving food traditions is once again portrayed as a key task in this process. Ultimately, then, Hammad resists not only western conceptions of women but also a Zionist narrative and current American foreign policies.

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120 Hammad, 33, l. 34-36.
121 Hammad, 33, l. 37-40.
122 see Hammad, 33, l. 6-11.
123 Hammad, 33, l. 21.
Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “Red Brocade” is also resistance literature, although it starts on a more sentimental note. Specifically, this poem resists a culture in which people are too busy to invest in each other. “Red Brocade” criticizes productivity when it becomes too easy an excuse to ignore people and shut them out, filling life only with selfish ambition.

Nye begins this piece by evoking the memory of an old time in the old world when everyone was more available:

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him before asking who he is

These simple lines quickly outline a world founded on hospitality and devoid of suspicion. Opening one’s home to a stranger is an unheard of behavior in the modern United States, where even neighborhoods are made up of strangers. The idea of feeding and bedding an unknown person for three days is thus highly counter-cultural. The reason for this injunction, as the poem continues, is to give the stranger time to regain his strength and more pointedly, to remove the host’s basis for asking the question in the first place—distrust. “Let’s go back to that. / Rice? Pine nuts?” Nye enjoins. She imagines herself in the role of host, feeding her tired guest and committing her child to water his horse. “I was not busy when you came! / I was not

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125 see Nye 40, l. 7-11.
preparing to be busy." She puts aside her work, her “armor,” and makes the time to attend to her guest’s needs.128

The poem ends firmly in the present tense, no longer in some nostalgic past.

I refuse to be claimed.

Your plate is waiting.

We will snip fresh mint

into your tea.129

Once again, with great simplicity, Nye makes her point. She rejects a culture of bustle and anonymity in favor of a neighborly way of life. Essentially, this poem presents a different hierarchy of values that goes against the grain of an American capitalist society. In “Red Brocade” the host chooses to prepare food for a stranger, which is an act of humility and generosity and refuses to be distracted from this task. This act is also one that requires time and care, symbolized in the host’s preparation of tea—the last ritual of a complete Arab meal—with fresh mint.

Food as remaking the old home in the new home

Finally, in many Arab American works, food supplies a way of coping with change, cultural insecurity, and the stress of difference. As the immigrant characters of these narratives face overwhelming change, foods from the old home provide them

127 Nye 40, l. 17-18.
128 Nye 40, l. 19.
129 Nye 40, l. 22-25.
with familiarity and continuity. In fact, this phenomenon mirrors the real food behaviors of many immigrant groups, who form separate “eating enclaves.”

Donna R. Gabaccia describes this pattern: “New Americans faced many changes over which they had relatively little control—where they would live, what kind of work they would do, which language they would be required to learn to speak. At least they could exercise control over their meals.”

Thus, in both actual and imagined immigrant families, food is a source of comfort in an otherwise strange and foreign land.

Maintaining the foodways of the old world (albeit with inevitable recipe changes) is also a kind of cultural compromise. As the cookbook-memoirs evidence, holding on to a cultural food heritage is a means of holding on to identity. Likewise, as expressed in the new world literature, resistance is an integral part of cultural survival when confronted with a hegemonic culture. Consequently, food is a means and expression of staying Arab in America.

Beyond familiarity and cultural preservation, food is actually a reconstruction of the old home in the new world. Although only in a limited and partial way, a bowl of fuul can impart the aromas and flavors of Cairo. This miniature version of home eases the anxiety of loss and ultimately makes it possible for Arab Americans to stay, and to call the new place “home.”

131 Gabaccia 48.
It is for this reason that when the young Lebanese bride of Susan Muaddi Darraj’s short story, “New World,” immigrates to Philadelphia, she is drawn to the Italin Market. Siham appreciates the Italian Market for two reasons: it provides her with the ingredients she needs to make her home cuisine, and it reminds her of the shops in Jerusalem’s Old City. Darraj describes the market through Siham’s eyes this way: “full of men yelling out the prices of vegetables and women peddling their crafts, their embroidered pillowcases and blouses. They even targeted tourists with photo frames and wall hangings that said in embroidered English, ‘God Bless Our Home.’”

Although Siham runs into many more difficulties with her new husband in their new home, the Italian market symbolizes a kind of anchoring force in her life. It anchors her to the world, family and identity she left behind.

The kitchen in Lawrence Joseph’s poem, “Sand Nigger,” provides a similarly stabilizing force. In the midst of the hostile racial landscape of Detroit, the speaker finds his grounding in the family kitchen. Joseph writes:

Lebanon is everywhere
in the house: in the kitchen
of steaming pots, leg of lamb
in the oven, plates of kousa

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Through cooking Lebanese dishes, the kitchen becomes a second Lebanon. It furnishes both the physical and metaphysical comforts of the old home. In his kitchen, the speaker is no longer a “sand nigger,” and for a moment, the pains of misfitting, failed family businesses and the angry Detroit streets, are eased.

Abu-Jaber also focuses on kitchens in writing about the reconstruction of the old home in the new one. Both of her parents cook to remember when they are away from their native-born land. In Jordan, her mother makes pancakes with a homesick heart. As Abu-Jaber watches her mother struggle with the ingredients and utensils at her disposal, the desire to taste home grips her. She writes: “I feel that at this moment we all want pancakes more passionately than we’ve ever wanted anything.”134 In the same way, Bud cooks regularly in his American kitchen to remember Jordan.

Reconstructing home in a different location, however, creates an interesting tension between remembering and forgetting. Although Bud cooks to remember, his cooking is different in New York than in Amman. At some point, the substitutions and revisions are no longer temporary and provisional: the recipe changes. The permanence of the change as well as the repeated performance of the change is a kind of forgetting. Abu-Jaber’s Aunt Aya tells her in the kitchen, when they are alone, that Bud is a part of this forgetting. “He thinks he cooks and eats Arabic food, but these walnuts weren’t grown from Jordanian earth and this butter wasn’t made from Jordanian lambs. He is eating the shadow of a memory.”135

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134 Abu-Jaber 36.
135 Abu-Jaber 190.
Even more considerable is how the reconstruction of the old home finalizes the act of staying, and calling a second place “home.” For eating a portion of the old home makes it bearable to live away from home and in truth, reduces the need for a material return. Accordingly, staying in the new world, as many immigrants can attest, is constantly equated to forgetting the homeland. In the same kitchen conversation, Aunt Aya imparts this wisdom to her young niece: “People say food is a way to remember the past. Never mind about that. Food is a way to forget.” Even as Bud—or for that matter, Abu-Jaber—tries to memorialize an identity rooted in the old home, the new home stands out.

Memory also figures into Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem, “My Father and the Fig Tree,” a biographical poem on her own father, Aziz Shihab. The poem describes Shihab’s deep-seated desire for fresh figs like those he consumed as a youth in Palestine. Nye describes the various other foods her father cultivated in gardens and back yards over the years—but never a fig tree.

“Plant one!” my mother said,

but my father never did.

He tended the garden half-heartedly, forgot to water,

let the okra get too big.”

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136 Abu-Jaber 189.
137 Nye 7, l. 25-30.
At the end of the poem, her father finally plants his own fig tree in Dallas, Texas. He is joyful at the sight of the ripe fruit, which he plucks “like ripe tokens, / emblems, assurance / of a world that was always his own.”

There is little doubt that in Nye’s narrative poem, the fig tree represents a reconstruction of the home her father misses. As Bardenstein enumerates, “from an outpost in Texas, far removed from the homeland, he has found, or in this instance created, a fragment, a “taste” of Palestine that enables him to live on without the actual whole one, or rather, away from it, but with a portable or edible version.” Indeed, the tree is more than a symbol of home—it is home, itself. Although partial and constructed, it offers the father the same fruits of his childhood without real return. It furthermore creates “home” in Texas by constituting the attributes of the old home, which in this case, are raw, sweet figs. Bardenstein summarizes this phenomenon well: “The poem presents one solution to the exile fixated on fragmented metonyms of the lost homeland: if you can manage to get hold of a fragment, then even Dallas, Texas, can ‘become’ a home / a Palestine.” It is fitting that the poem ends on a joyous note, as the crises of both identity and exile are ostensibly resolved.

Although “My Father and the Figtree” was originally published in Nye’s published volume, Different Ways to Pray, it also appears in Shihab’s cookbook-memoir with some insightful notes by the author. In a personal vein, Nye shares several responses that her poem elicited from readers around the world. While most

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138 Nye 7, l. 39-41.
139 Bardenstein 366.
140 Bardenstein 366.
resonated with the poem and its story, one student from the West Bank’s Bir Zeit University had a very different reaction. Nye shares how he approached her after her reading, crying and confessing, “‘I don’t want your father to love a figtree in America. Because if he does, he may stop remembering us here.’” Nye seems to approach his interpretation of the poem as a misunderstanding, writing, “It was hard to convince him otherwise in such a short meeting.” However, the student actually hit upon a truth to which Abu-Jaber’s aunt also subscribed: recreating beloved fragments of the old home in the new home is an expression of permanence. While Shihab’s figtree is certainly not a rejection of his former home in Palestine, it is a merciful balm that eases the sting of memory.

Conclusion

In sum, food literature of the new world tries to describe life in the United States through Arab American eyes. The authors take on the narrative lens of both recent immigrants and American-born Arabs, exploring who they are and how they see themselves in the world. For those born in the United States, the authors are interested in how they arrive at a cultural identity. Since “Arab” is not a distinct racial category, the characters may see themselves as culturally and racially white until certain ethnic

141 Nye, Introduction, Taste of Palestine xvi.
142 Nye, Taste of Palestine xvi.
markers become apparent. Food is certainly one of these markers of difference that causes the young Arab Americans to recognize that they are not American in the same way their friends or classmates are. Eventually, they must come to grips with their position as marginalized citizens in their home country. For some, this leads to anger, cultural shame and a desire to cast off all markers of difference. However, most embrace their differences and fight for their right to sit at the table.

In terms of the immigrant population, new world authors investigate the process of adopting a new hybrid identity and eventually becoming Arab American. In this, the authors are especially drawn to the encounter of east and west and what impact it makes on each party. They forcefully contest binary divisions of the world, presenting truly “non-traditional” characters who act out complex motivations and desires. New world food writers also ask critical questions about how immigrants cope with the memory of the lost homeland and find the will to stay in the United States.

At the conjunction of immigrant generations, the new world food writers investigate the shape and form of Arab American identity. They describe their own personal and family struggles to find peace in a contradictory hyphenated identity. They also describe their path of resistance, hinting at the difficult choices and compromises they must make along the way. Most pointedly, these writers tackle racism directed towards the Arab community in the United States. Without apology, they tie their lot to this community, while continuing to engage with dominant culture and seeking real change through its own language and institutions.
CHAPTER 3:
Eating, Anxiety and Defining Arab American

After examining the literature of food on the old and new worlds, something of a pattern materializes. As expected, the literature provides nothing that approximates a rigid, complete or permanent Arab American identity. In fact, quite the opposite is true: the authors write from multiple viewpoints, acting on convictions that often “transgress” the boundaries of identity set out by other Arab American voices—both in content and approach. Tensions build along the axes of genre, national origin, and immigrant generation—but some writers cross these lines, too. Yet, in spite of the ample differences—in audience, intention, style and message—the literature, as a whole, does outline the beginnings of an Arab American identity discourse. Even this outline, however, includes absences and blurred portions where the ink leaks out, unstopped.

The issue of representation occupies the discourse’s center, deeply wed to the process of defining identity. For through representation identities are created, consolidated, and reified in language and image. Effectively, representation lays out the cues and limits of Arab American identity to both those who claim and observe that identity. Self-representation is therefore the highest value of the identity discourse, as Arab American writers reject the observer’s imposed definitions of self that often incline towards orientalism.
Although self-representation is the foundational conviction of the identity discourse, it does not single handedly offer a solution to the difficulties of representation. As the cases of Diana Abu-Jaber and Mona Simpson demonstrate, self-representation by itself does not guarantee the “right” kind of identity portraiture.\textsuperscript{143} There are still risks of transgressions, whether because of internalized colonization, “wrong” identification, or even life experiences that coincide with stereotypes. As one Arab American writer asked during a RAWI roundtable discussion on “Old Paths, ‘New Directions’” in Arab American literature: “Can an abusive Arab father ever just be an abusive father?”\textsuperscript{144} The discourse, by and large, rejects anything that smells of exceptionalism, exoticism, primitivism or whatever could be easily swallowed by the likes of Samuel Huntington.

It should also be noted that the identity discourse offered by Arab American food literature is not identical to that offered by Arab American literature as a whole or other Arab American communities, such as Arab American activists. By the estimation of some Arab Americans, the identity discourse of Arab American food literature is subversive. As discussed earlier, some find the metaphor of food apolitical and assimilationist or at least, inadequate in the face of the very large political issues the community currently faces. However, my analysis evidences that

there is more depth and complexity to the food literature than some of these critiques allow.

The debate on representation of Arab American identity, like Arab American literature, is certainly not new. However, there is perhaps a greater sense of urgency to the debate given the very real wars that are taking place in both the old and new worlds. These battles are over justice, truth and survival—not only the right to exist but also the right to exist on one’s own terms.

As Arab Americans writers take on self-representation, then, how does food fit into their identity discourse? Why has food, among other possible objects and behaviors risen to such a high position in the identity discourse of Arab American food literature? How does food order, unify, preserve, orient and most importantly, secure Arab American identities? The answers to these questions fall into three general groupings: 1) Food and the story of ethnic survival—how food narrates a community’s history of overcoming hardships in the new world; 2) Food and identity anxiety—how food assuages the pain of loss and provides a path to cultural preservation; 3) Food and the dilemma of representation—how food offers an alternative to the pitfalls of orientalist discourse. Together, these conclusions attest to an emerging consensus on who we are, where we came from and how to talk about it.
The importance of food to identity formation is certainly not unique to the immigrant experience. Whether a part of “invisible” majority culture or “deviant” minority culture, food environments influence our constructions of credos and categories. Generally speaking, eating preferences and behaviors are part of familial and societal legacies. We may prepare the signature dishes of deceased relatives to mark holidays or guard the secret ingredients of a family recipe. In other instances, particular spices may evoke strong emotions or memories in us. Even in disordered eating behaviors, we tend to reflect social values and constraints.145

In her culinary history of ethnicity in the United States, We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans, Donna R. Gabaccia confirms the connection between food—especially the food we eat as children—and cultural identity: “Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort.”146 In this way, food is a universal—albeit often overlooked—informer of identity.


146 Gabaccia 7.
If food defines safety and comfort to people who still live among familiar faces and objects, how much more so will this be true for those who leave homelands behind? Incidentally, food is one of the habits that immigrants in the US often maintain to some degree, even as many other cultural practices slowly decline.\footnote{Gabaccia 36-63. This is most true of early periods of immigrant settlement. However, Gabaccia is careful to note that even in this stage, boundary crossing still takes place.} Several factors support this phenomenon, including food’s ability to: provide the immigrants with a daily portion of home, communicate cultural values and social economies, as well as aid in the process of economic mobility. Food literature expresses this legacy of migration, reflecting these same beliefs and their consequences.

For this reason, the identity discourse on food and survival resembles the lived experience of early Arab immigrants, most of whom originated from greater Syria.\footnote{Alixia Naff, \textit{Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience} (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1985) 1-3.} Like many other immigrant populations, they formed ethnic enclaves, in which they continued many of their previous cultural practices, including those that involved food. As Naff chronicles in her detailed history, \textit{Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience}, “Each settlement was, in fact, a stage on which the memories of village life were reenacted.”\footnote{Naff, \textit{Becoming American} 204.}

Naff goes on to describe the eating habits of these early settlements, which preserved Syrian foodways as much as possible. She writes: “Their preference was
for their own food, and although some of the special ingredients, such as cracked wheat (burghol) and Middle Eastern herbs, were ordered in bulk . . . , most of their needs were purchased locally."\(^{150}\) Some of the food items Naff highlights from the early accounts include Arabic bread, stuffed grape leaves, “mazza,” and kibee.\(^{151}\) Overall, Naff characterizes the diet of early Arab immigrants living in settler communities as “frugal” and yet ample enough to stave off hunger.\(^{152}\)

In their foodways, early Arab American communities were like many other immigrant groups that continued to eat their homes, so to speak, long after entering a new food environment. Gabaccia offers several reasons for this pattern, such as religion, class and attitudes towards labor and processed food. However, Gabaccia concludes that the connection between food and cultural identity played a larger influence than many other concerns. As new immigrants faced overwhelming identity shifts, both external (geographic, economic, linguistic) and internal (from cultural dominance to cultural marginality; fluency to illiteracy; indigenousness to foreignness), food was one of the few domains over which they were able to exert choice and control.\(^{153}\) Consequently, ethnic Americans have often formed fairly separate and resilient “eating communities”\(^{154}\)

Arab American food literature certainly reflects the impulse of ethnic Americans to cook home foods for their comforting powers. As discussed in chapter

\(^{150}\) Naff, *Becoming American* 209.


\(^{152}\) Naff, *Becoming American* 207.

\(^{153}\) Gabaccia 48.

\(^{154}\) Gabaccia 35.
two, food appears thematically in the new world writings as a means of physically reconstructing the old world in a new and distant place. The familiar tastes and aromas provide a welcome repose from the estrangement Arab American face in the United States, whether as immigrants or marginalized citizens. In old world writings, too, there is more than a hint of this same urge. For the authors, themselves, writing about Arab foods constitutes a kind of return. Both sides of the literature undertake lengthy, emotional descriptions of food that suggest something beyond the mere sensory experience of good food.

In addition to providing the comforts of a lost home, food has been meaningful to immigrant communities because of the cultural currencies it contains. Like the visiting patterns and distribution of *qat* that Anne Meneley writes about in her ethnography of Zabidi women, food is a means of conveying distance and intimacy, joy and grief, approval and shame. In her culinary history, Gabaccia adds this to the reasons for which ethnic minority groups are likely to preserve their old foodways, “because food initiated and maintained traditional relationships, expressed the extent of social distance between people, demonstrated status and prestige, rewarded and punished children’s behavior, and treated illness.” In short, food both illustrated and reproduced the community’s social economy.

155 see Anne Meneley’s discussion of Zabidi women’s visiting patterns in rural Yemen and how they both create and reinforce social hierarchies through initiating and responding to invitations, and distributing or receiving *qat*, in *Tournaments of Value: Sociability and Hierarchy in a Yemeni Town* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996).
156 Gabaccia 51.
Naff found that kitchens were a locus of social activity in the early Arab settlements in the U.S. As a shared, common space, kitchens quickly “replaced, in many ways, the social and functional hearth of the Syrian village home as the center of folks life and stands out in the immigrants’ memories as the locus of treasured moments.”\textsuperscript{157} Consequently, a wide range of events unfolded in the kitchen, including common meals, baths, card games, weddings, and births.\textsuperscript{158} When they could afford it, stoves were used also used for heat in cold winter climates. More commonly, however, this was a luxury the Syrian émigrés could not afford.\textsuperscript{159}

Illusions to a culinary social economy are also visible in contemporary Arab American food literature. Cookbook-memoir authors specify holiday delicacies, seasonal dishes and recipes with particular nutritional or medicinal value. For instance, Shihab’s “Dajaj Mahshi” celebrates marriage, motherhood and birth.\textsuperscript{160} Poetry and fiction also refer to the social meanings of food, such as Shakir’s heroine’s daydream of \textit{maaza} in Beirut as a symbol of her father’s acceptance and approval.\textsuperscript{161}

Besides the general social economy, food and kitchen spaces also constituted specific home values that were readily incorporated into the cultures of the early Arab settlements in the US—namely, hospitality, generosity and a communal spirit. As Naff writes, “many Syrians saw the common kitchen as their surrogate home, the place where they could be quintessentially Arab, demonstrating those most quintessential

\textsuperscript{157} Naff, \textit{Becoming American} 208.  
\textsuperscript{158} Naff, \textit{Becoming American} 208.  
\textsuperscript{159} Naff, \textit{Becoming American} 208.  
\textsuperscript{160} Shihab 95.  
\textsuperscript{161} Shakir 65.
Arab values—generosity and hospitality—of which food was the quintessential symbol.”  

Hospitality was especially important in this context, as new immigrants arrived and peddlers returned after long absences. Naff observes that despite the meager resources of the settlements, no one in want of shelter or food was turned away: “Despite the crowding, it was frequently said that ‘if someone came from the old country and didn’t have a place to stay, Syrians would give him a place to stay and feed him.’”

These same cultural values are upheld in Arab American food literature. Writings from both old and new world literature tout the hospitable character of Arab culture through various recollections, dialogues and reflections. The values hospitality and generosity are often pictured through food, as in Nye’s poem, “Red Brocade.” Various foodways give shape and meaning to these values—even as both values and practices shift. For example, many of the recipes in the cookbook-memoirs describe the “traditional” and more time-consuming preparation methods, even while including short cuts. Even though they offer revisions to suit an assumed busy American lifestyle, the inclusion of longer preparation methods suggests “un-American” values—cooking slowly, carefully, “from scratch,” with less-processed ingredients. Thus food literature maintains these values while also adding new inflections.

Lastly, food tells the story of the immigrants’ economic climb in the United States, especially in the settlement stage. As Naff has extensively chronicled, the early

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162 Naff, Becoming American 209.
163 Louis S., as cited in Naff 206.
Syrian immigrants overwhelmingly took on peddling as a profession. They were “mobile department stores,” carrying a wide range of household items including practical and luxury items. Their settlements were often arranged around the suppliers, who functioned as informal community leaders and “liaison[s] between them and the host community.” However, by 1910 peddling abated, as department stores and mail-order companies lessened the need for the peddlers’ wares. Additionally, the immigrants began to settle down, looking towards a permanent future in the United States.

In the settlement stage, family business became the primary aspiration of many Syrian immigrants. Naff notes that “Dry goods and grocery stores were most popular” although the early Arabs tried their luck with a whole range of business enterprises. Newly arrived immigrants in this stage often worked in factories while also owning family stores, which their female and younger family members administered. A notable example of the grocery store model that Naff cites is Louis S.— “one of the earliest and leading grocers” of Detroit. Not long after his arrival, Louis S. began selling fruit from a stand and in a relatively short period, converted his capital and

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168 Naff, Becoming American 272.
business acumen into seventeen stores.\textsuperscript{169} He went on to encourage other Syrians to start their own grocery stores by offering them logistical and financial support.\textsuperscript{170} By 1926, one source stated that “there was a small family Syrian grocery on practically every corner and Syrians were delivering or distributing much of the merchandise they sold.”\textsuperscript{171} This example demonstrates the essential role grocery stores played in the Arab immigrants’ economic success in the new world and the eventual development of a Syrian middle class. Food, was thus integral to the creation of Arab America.

In all of these ways, food, is an effective means of telling part of the story of self—“where we came from.” It parallels the experiences of early Arab immigrants in both their home and work lives, remembering the food they ate, upholding communal values and celebrating their upward mobility in America. What this narrative hides, however, is the radical assimilation that the early Syrian population enacted in food and non-food practices, as well as the story and character of the later waves of Arab immigrants. In fact, Naff concludes her history of early Arab immigrants by this arresting observation: “If political and economic events had not reactivated Arab immigration and an interest in Arab culture, Syrian-Americans might have assimilated themselves out of existence.”\textsuperscript{172} Although drawing from the revitalization that the later, more diverse immigrants brought about, the discourse on food does not represent

\textsuperscript{169} Telephone conversation with George S., Detroit, Mich, May 1980, as cited in Naff 272.
\textsuperscript{170} George S., as cited in Naff 272.
\textsuperscript{171} Naff, \textit{Becoming American} 272.
\textsuperscript{172} Naff, \textit{Becoming American} 330.
this “far from homogenous” group, “whose hybrid identities locate them at the margins of “Arab” and “American” identity.\textsuperscript{173}

Arab American food literature, if not its identity discourse, signals some of the consequences and erosions that resulted from early Syrian assimilation. Identity anxiety is in part a symptom of the early Arab’s Americanization. Majaj points out that: “Contemporary efforts at asserting and celebrating Arab American ethnicity are grounded in this intertwined history of earlier assimilationist forces, contemporary hostility, and unclear racial status.”\textsuperscript{174} As a result, this body of Anglophone Arab literature also tells the story of how other aspect of culture—markedly, language—were lost.

\textit{Food and Identity Anxiety}

Although some may question the value of identity studies or even the concept of identity in all its slipperiness,\textsuperscript{175} identity issues are an obvious preoccupation of Arab American food literature. For some, this preoccupation is expressed through heavy-handed didacticism, which cautiously and systematically draws a portrait of Arab / Arab American life and culture. Others take more risk, exploring the issue of

\textsuperscript{174} Majaj, \textit{Arabs in America} 321.
identity through the perspective of imaginary characters, some of whom even represent taboo identities such as the “self-hating” Arab (Lugman) or the “assimilated” (Dr. Rashid) Arab American. Still others write autobiographically, aggressively resisting neo-orientalist stereotyping with the voice of the “authentic” Arab American self. More rarely, autobiographical writings show vulnerability, revealing the author’s own identity conflicts and cultural failures. Whether seamless, angry, celebratory, fragmented or ambivalent, this record of self-representation reveals a deep-seated anxiety over identity. In its gaze, this anxiety is not merely introspective (who am I?), but also outwardly turned (who do others perceive me to be?)

The anxiety over identity in Arab American food literature is linked to its identity model, which resembles Stuart Hall’s description of the “sociological subject.”\(^\text{176}\) By Hall’s account, the sociological model is less fixed than the “enlightenment” view, which held that humans had a “permanent,” “continuous,” and “essential center.”\(^\text{177}\) By contrast, the sociological model allows for the subject to change within a defined relational structure of self and society. As Hall explains, the sociological subject’s identity “is formed in the ‘interaction’ between self and society. The subject still has an inner core that is ‘the real me,’ but this is formed and modified in continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds ‘outside’ and the identities which they offer.”\(^\text{178}\) By this view, then, a “real” self, although not fixed at birth, still exists and

\(^{176}\) Hall 597.  
\(^{177}\) Hall 597.  
\(^{178}\) Hall 597.
changes only along one dimension, thus allowing it to remain somewhat stabilized and continuous.

This view resonates with the conception of identity found in Arab American food literature, which closely ties the authentic self to culture. In fact, identity is virtually analogous to cultural identity in the literature. It is for this reason that cultural changes such as immigration, and at the extreme end, assimilation, present such a “dangerous,” rupturing force. If a new and unknown culture—especially one with negative constructions of the self— Influences the subject, there is a real danger of rift and fragmentation.

However, the concept of identity, as Arab American food literature expresses it, departs from the sociological view, in its anxiety. The sociological view is much more hopeful about the ability of identity to “suture[e] . . . the subject into the structure,” thus “stabilizing both subjects and the cultural worlds they inhabit.” In contrast, Arab American literature is apprehensive about the “shifts” in “social landscapes” and the problematics of multiple and possibly contradictory identifications—or even worse, singular identification with the “wrong” culture. Effectively, Arab American food literature is struggling to maintain a modern, unified view of personhood even as post-modernity encroaches upon that world. As a result, the burden to assert, prove, consolidate and narrate identity weighs heavily upon the authors and their subjects.

179 Hall 598.
180 Hall 598.
The mode of “proof” found in the old world writings is one method of coping with this burden. The authors who write in this vein wield food knowledge as proof of their Arab identity. Whether through intimate geographical descriptions, or instructions on the perfect moment to pick an olive, these authors try to convince their audience (and perhaps themselves) that they are just as Arab as the day they left their home country. For those who never left, but rather inherited dispossession or were born into the second-generation immigration paradigm, proving entails relying on generational memory or “returning” to parents’ homeland for the first time.¹⁸¹

Another way of coping with identity anxiety is to construct a continuous narrative that bridges the distance between the old and new countries. For many authors, food is the narrative which allows them to trace an unbroken line from “here” to “there;” “now” to “then.” Like the bread crumbs in the fairytale of Hansel and Gretel, food points the way home, thus making it possible for the Arab émigrés to safely explore the “forest” without getting lost. In this, food provides a comforting story of self that smoothes over the distance, difficulties and fissures that immigration, exile and displacement enact.

The earlier discussion of transmission lines in old world food literature points to this narrative, notably in Shihab’s and Sawaya’s cookbook-memoirs. Their omissions and optimism render the chain of transmission more organic and continuous than it actually is. This phenomenon betrays their yearning for a complete narrative identity, a direct line linking them to their grandparents and their ancestral home.

¹⁸¹ See ch. 1
Finally, Arab American literature asserts identity through food. This is perhaps the most empowered form of addressing identity anxiety, for it is not an apologetic mode. Rather, identity assertions squarely face cultural insecurity, proudly owning their hyphenated identity. Even these assertions vary in confidence however. Some do not wish to focus too much on hyphenation, preferring a minority-majority construct, which takes the US as its self-evident context. They blur the distinction between Arab and Arab American, perhaps to avoid the implications of examining themselves vis-à-vis a context that would consider them privileged and American. The bravest of these writers admit that there are gaps, without glossing over or obscuring them. For example, Hammad and Joseph both write about their weak knowledge of Arabic.\footnote{Hammad 47; Joseph 243} Similarly, Abu-Jaber shares many personal moments in which she rejected her Arab heritage in some way.\footnote{Abu-Jaber 227} Altogether, these authors take up the task of firmly securing their own Arab identity—once again through the use of food.

*Food and the Dilemma of Representation*

Given the history of “how we became Arab American” and identity anxiety over “who we are,” the issue of representation presents definite dilemmas. There are two main axes of tension to this debate. First, tension exists between those who support and oppose assimilation into “White” American culture. This tension often
translates into different philosophies of writing. The second axis revolves around the question of “airing dirty laundry”—when it comes to representation, *what should we say our community and ourselves in public*? Once again, food provides a solution—albeit an imperfect one—to this dilemma. It offers a common metaphor that unites writers along both sides of these two axes.

In terms of the first axis, opposing identity bents in the Arab American community create this tension over representation. As Majaj summarizes, “The debate points toward a split in the Arab-American community between those who wish to safeguard whatever privileges Arab Americans possess as nominal “white” people and those who feel that Arab Americans have more to gain and more to contribute by identifying with people of color.” Majaj further condenses this debate into a “tension between inclusion and exclusion.” Writers who support integration are more likely to take on mainstream genres and primarily “white” audiences. In contrast, anti-assimilationist writers draw on the language of other minority groups and only write to mainstream audiences when challenging and confronting racism.

Berndt Ostendorf offers another way to think about this tension in his article, “Literary Acculturation: What Makes Ethnic Literature ‘Ethnic.’” He divides immigrant attitudes towards representation into two groups, “progressives” and “traditionalists.” By his account, these two constituents “divide over the issue of

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184 Majaj, *Arabs in America* 322.
185 Majaj, *Arabs in America* 322.
giving priority to class or cultural interests.”

The advantage of Ostendorf’s approach is its conception of differing motivations in a power economy. According to his analysis, “progressives” vie for power through claiming the markings of power (whiteness) in American society. By contrast, “traditionalists” aspire to gain power through coalitions with other people of color in the US. The only drawback to Ostendorf’s approach is the definite valorization attached to his category titles—“progressive” denotes modern relevance while “traditionalist” denotes primitivism and stagnation.

If assimilationists are more motivated by class than culture, this will certainly affect their choice of content and genre when they write. For example, a cookbook is a far easier sell than angry, existential poetry. However, it should be noted that Arab American food writers who adopt an assimilationist platform may still “sneak” more subversive content “through the back door,” in an effort to change the mainstream culture that they inhabit.

The second axis of debate is also one that haunts many writers of minority status inside and outside the Arab American context. In an environment of internal conflict, identity anxiety and external pressures, telling one’s story is never an “innocent” or neutral activity. Yet, Arab American writers, as a whole seek to tell the truth about their experiences. However, there are two types of “truths” which enter the

187 However, a similar criticism could also be made of my terms, “pro-“ and “anti-“ “assimilationist.”
domain of taboo topics and such writings run the risk of becoming invisible or being taken-up by the “wrong” side. Currently, the two most apparent dangers are representations that give credence to negative stereotypes of Arabs or in some way poke holes in the Arab American identity construct, rendering it even less secure.

Some examples of this first kind of risky writing include portions of Shihab’s and Kalush’s works. As noted earlier, Shihab’s cookbook-memoir includes an unflattering cultural portrait in his vignette on polygamy. Kalush, in turn, highlights aspects of Arab culture that are often exoticized in western media.188

Ostendorf focuses on the second form of taboo ethnic literature in his analysis. He notes that a community’s authors often take up this kind of writing and consequently, disappoint both the “progressive” and “traditionalist” groups. His research on ethnic literatures revealed that “the traditionalists wanted a literature loyal to their vision of the home country (and loyal meant traditional in theme and form) and the progressives did not want to be held back from Americanization by uncomfortable truths.”189 As a result, representations that defied this “tyranny of expectation,” as he calls it, were rejected.

The selected works by Abu-Jaber, Shakir and Abraham best illustrate this kind of writing, as they depart from expectations. Abu-Jaber takes many risks in revealing the personal details of her parents’ and her own struggle to work out identity. She even questions the usefulness of cultural identity, itself at one point: “Deeper down, from

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188 see discussion in ch. 1
189 Ostendorf 577-578.
beneath that question, emerges a larger, more formless question, something about whether people have to decide exactly who they are and where exactly their home is. Do we have to know who we are once and for all? How many lives are we allowed? To a similar end, Shakir and Lawrence destabilize identity through their characters’ ambivalent attachments to their Arab heritage. All three of these authors also explore gender and sexuality—topics which tend to disrupt the inherent masculinity of most societal structures.

In light of these two axes of tension and debate, the creation of an identity discourse with shared, consistent food language and imagery is quite remarkable. Food, here, emerges as a unifying identity symbol that meets the needs of diverse literary interests and genres. As the old world and new world food writings show, food is a pliant tool that consolidates different Arab Americans and their literatures into a single “imagined community.” As cited in Majaj’s piece, Chandra Talpade Mohanty clarifies that such a community is:

‘Imagined’ not because it is not ‘real’ but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across diverse boundaries, and ‘community’ because in spire of internal hierarchies . . ., it nevertheless

190 Abu-Jaber 69.
suggests a significant, deep commitment to what Benedict Anderson, in referring to the idea of the nation, calls ‘horizontal comradeship.’”

In the case of Arab American literature, food is the means of “collaboration” and “alliance.” By using it, Arab Americans signal their membership in this community.

In addition to the reasons already cited, food is acceptable to all because it falls within the two fundamental “policed borders” it is a representation of the self and secondly, it avoids the pitfalls of orientalist discourse. Unlike many other cultural rites and behavior, food is not “spectacle.” Rather, food demystifies the fantastical pictures of Arabs and Arab Americans that orientalism produced. It thus allows Arab Americans to simultaneously assert their “sameness” and their difference.

Conclusions

Overall, Arab American food literature constructs an identity discourse that is anchored and bounded by food. Food is the common thread connecting the authors in their diverse aspirations and expressions. It is the language they employ to remember, forget, preserve and claim both home and identity. Food is also the basis on which

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193 Chandra Tolpade Mohanty, Introduction, Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991) 4, as cited in Majaj Arabs in America 326.
194 see Majaj 323 for discussion of policing ethnic boundaries.
195 This contrasts with Chinese literature where Chinatown is a regular feature. However, unlike food, Chinatown is a site of both habitation (the ordinary) and spectacle (the exceptional). See Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, “Ethnic Sign, and the Difficulty of Rehabilitative Representation: Chinatown in Some Works of Chinese American Fiction,” The Yearbook of English Studies 24 (1994): 251-262.
they assert a common identity and prove their membership in it. Furthermore, food is the means and expression of becoming a true Arab American and adopting a new home.

Food derives its unifying power from its many symbolic possibilities. In the old world literature, is a tool for transmitting and teaching culture, proving cultural identity and remembering home. In the new world literature, food symbolizes the process of Arab American identity formation in both 1st and later generation immigrants as well as describing and encouraging resistance to American cultural hegemony. Food also garnishes power by weaving a comforting identity narrative that ties the new world and the new Arab Americans to the lost homeland. It provides continuity of values and experience from the early Arab American settlements to the current political quagmires. In so doing, it suggests that food will continue to sustain Arab Americans today as they face the double-edged sword of racism and invisibility. Food furthermore soothes identity anxiety vis-à-vis both the old and new worlds, easing the strain of both cultural loss and marginalization. Finally, food offers a solution to the problem of representation, drawing Arab Americans together into a common entity.

Despite the apparent success of food imagery and the construction of a complex discourse, the literature evidences that Arab American identity remains fundamentally “insecure.” Identity anxiety is expressed in the old world literature through the modes of cultural transmission and proof, as the authors try to secure their own and their descendants’ identity. New world literature also betrays this anxiety, through constant
questioning of the boundary between Arab and American and even sometimes in the form of judgment towards assimilated Arab Americans. The only author who is perhaps immune to this anxiety is Shakir, as she deliberately blurs and transgresses the borders. This anxiety is simultaneously a consequence of the early Syrian assimilationist legacy, a continuing belief that identity “there” is more secure than identity “here” as well as the crisis of combating racism while invisible.

Ultimately, the food-identity discourse only partially secures identity. In addition to the factors already stated, insecurity may also reflect the holes of the discourse. The largest of these is the failure of the food metaphor—as wielded by the authors examined here—to truly include all Arab Americans. Despite the variety already discussed, the literature is homogenous in other ways. First of all, both the authors and their food illusions are overwhelmingly Levantine. While foods like grape leaves and maaza may resonate with Levantine Americans, they will not have the same effect on Arab Americans of Khaleeji and Maghrebi descent. In this way, the discourse alienates some Arab Americans, thus relegating itself to regionalism. Secondly, the food discourse is largely a secular one and does not draw from the growing Muslim American movement or Arab American history of community involvement in churches and mosques. The religious references the literature does contain are tertiary and superficial in most cases, neither initiating questions of identity

nor faith. For those who see religion as an important aspect of their personal and cultural identity, the food-identity discourse fails to comprehensively represent or engage them. Finally, the literature is dominated by female voices. Food, too, might be construed as a “female” concern. How, then, can this discourse capture the attention of men who are even today kicked out kitchens?

In light of these holes and failures, it is hard to predict how resilient this identity-food discourse will prove. While new writings may continue to emanate from the descendants of particular regions of the Arab World, the question remains whether the discourse will be able to continue in its consolidating capacity. Even more significant is the question of what vehicle, if any, will replace food, in the event that the discourse declines? Will another, more suitable language of identity emerge or will, the existing fissures in the community grow larger, as some predict.
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