

Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology

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Narrating Food in Diana Abu-Jaber's Culinary Memoirs

Alexa Weik von Mossner

Diana Abu-Jaber is known as a literary foodie. Almost all her books treat Middle Eastern food in some way, and its preparation, enjoyment, and emotional meaning are important themes. She has explained that she never made the conscious choice to make food the central subject of her writing. It was simply a logical extension of “the obsession with food” that filled her childhood because “that’s what happens when your parents are from a place or time where people really might starve” (“Race, Food”). Abu-Jaber’s father immigrated from Jordan to the United States at the age of 23, where he worked as a line cook and dreamed of opening his own Jordanian restaurant one day. “His cooking gave him a way of having a conversation,” explains Abu-Jaber (“Race, Food”), a form of communication that she later tried out herself, working as a chef in several restaurants before she turned to writing as a form of conversation *about* food and about what traditional Middle Eastern dishes mean to her as an Arab American woman. Her two memoirs, *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and *Life without a Recipe* (2011), trace her parents’ and her own life journeys over decades, highlighting the crucial role that food played in those journeys as a means of maintaining an emotional connection to Arab culture and to the mixing of Middle Eastern and Western culinary traditions in Abu-Jaber’s own, culturally hybrid, family.

This juxtaposition of food, emotional memory, and (im)migrant identity is a common theme in ethnic American literatures. As Eda Dedebas Dunder notes, “writers of food memoirs and culinary novels” from the Global South “associate the migrant experience with the fusion of cultures and cuisines in their work” (139), but such cultural and culinary fusion is rarely simple or unforced. Fred Gardaphe and Wenying Xu observe that immigrants’ food choices are often circumscribed by “demands for assimilation and inculcation of ethnic inferiority” (5), leading them to disavow traditional foods and culinary practices of their culture of origin. The same food, however, can also provide an important emotional connection to a cherished heritage and place of origin—a source of both comfort and yearning—which is why such culinary practices are kept alive not only within the ethnic communities themselves but also in the

literature that emerges from them. “Serving as figures of speech including tropes, metaphors, images, and ironies,” write Gardaphe and Xu, “food references depict celebrations of families and communities, portray identity crises, create usable histories to establish ancestral connections, subvert ideology and practices of assimilation” (5). It is often the most personal, most affectively charged, and most memorable experiences that are narrated through food.

Abu-Jaber’s work is a case in point, and in this chapter, I will approach *The Language of Baklava* from a cognitive narratological angle to highlight how her first memoir foregrounds the author’s hybrid cultural identity through the narration of food. Abu-Jaber organizes her recollections around the vivid evocations of fondly nicknamed Middle Eastern and equally beloved American dishes that, along with their recipes, interrupt the main text, drawing attention to themselves. The combination of vivid “multisensory imagery” (Starr 276)—in which the dishes come sensually alive for readers—and accompanying recipes not only uses food as a cultural bridge between the United States and Jordan. It also encourages readers to use the memoir as cookbook and to thereby extend their engagement with Arab-American culture beyond the reading experience.

Tastes like Home: Narrating Food, Identity, and Emotion in the Culinary Memoir

Since the days of the Early Republic, food has played a central role in American identity formation and in the delineation of who is a “proper” American and who is considered a cultural, racial, or ethnic outsider. In *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture* (2014), Jennifer Jensen Wallach explains that “historically, many complicated and contradictory American ideas about racial difference have been reflected in the nation’s attitude toward food” (169). Since white Anglo-Saxon eaters “with strong English culinary ties” dominated the food scene in many parts of the country throughout the nineteenth century, they were in the position to make decisions about embracing, modifying, incorporating, or rejecting the cuisines of other immigrants and minority groups. Wallach reminds us that such decisions were always inflected by the country’s racial politics and that “generally, both the food and the people from white ethnic groups were adopted more readily than those of people of color” (169). But even as the culinary traditions of non-white ethnic groups do not feature prominently in what today is known as the Standard American Diet (SAD), they are increasingly appreciated under the label of “ethnic food.”¹ The term itself is problematic because it tends to be applied “selectively, to cuisines that seem the most foreign, often cooked by people with the brownest skin” (Ramanathan) and thus to signify a certain kind of inferiority and alterity (Ray 150). But that does not

change that these cuisines constitute important cultural practices within the respective communities.²

Food, then, is “inseparably tied to race” (Williams-Forson and Walker 283) in U.S. culture, and for successive waves of non-European, non-Western immigrants, things were never as simple as keeping some of their food traditions alive in a home away from home. Rather, the dishes they consumed and cherished became an important identity marker and a means of negotiating the degree of their assimilation into mainstream U.S. culture. As Jennifer Ho has observed, “food is a critical medium for compliance with and resistance to Americanization” for “hyphenated peoples” and “a means for enacting the ambiguities” (3) of hybrid identities.

This is true not only for the daily life of ethnic American communities but also for literatures that emerge from these communities. Anita Mannur argues that scholars should begin to think of “the culinary as a mode of representation” so that we can arrive at a better understanding of the ways in which “we script alterity through culinary discourse” (17). Much of the scholarship on food and ethnic identity focuses on Asian American literature, where culinary modes of representation are remarkably prevalent; comparable explorations of other ethnic American literatures are much less common.³ Scholarship on Arab American literature has a strong interest in transnational identity and belonging (Fadda-Conrey 4), but explorations of food in this context have mostly focused on the work of Abu-Jaber who, in addition to her two food-centered novels, *Crescent* (2003) and *Birds of Paradise* (2011), has also contributed to the nonfiction tradition of the culinary memoir.⁴

In Traci Marie Kelly’s definition, the culinary memoir is “a literary extension of kitchen storytelling.... a complex pastiche of recipes, personal anecdotes, family history, public history, photographs, even family trees” (252). This form of life writing is different from the “chef memoir” (Kinney 60) in that it is authored by someone—often a woman—who may not be a celebrity chef, but whose life nevertheless revolves around food, at least in their own recollections. The culinary memoir is also different from the “autobiographical cookbook” (Kelly 254) in that its recipes—if it contains any—are not indexed because “the author is decidedly emphasizing the importance of the *story* in contrast to the recipes” (256, emphasis in original). If the author has an immigrant background, that *story* typically grapples with identity-related issues and experiences of transnational dislocation. Pertinent examples include Shoba Narayan’s *Monsoon Diary* (2004) and Bich Minh Nguyen’s *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* (2007), which invite readers to examine what Mannur calls “culinary citizenship—that which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain identarian positions via their relationship to food” (Mannur 29). Abu-Jaber’s memoirs attempt the same by “concocting,” as Allyssa Lee has put it, “a feast of words and images

from her Arab-American experience” that connects the sensory pleasures of food to the art of storytelling and to the question of what it means to grow up biracial in two countries—the United States and Jordan—that could hardly be more different.

It is this experience of growing up *in-between* cultural worlds that distinguishes Abu-Jaber’s life writing from many other memoirs by ethnic American writers. As Carol Bardenstein has noted, culinary memoirs “tend to conjure up ... ostensibly ‘authentic’ worlds in a largely nostalgic register” (60), because their narrators have lost access to the places and foods that they evoke in their texts due to age or other inhibiting factors. If the author is an immigrant, that inaccessible world is located outside the United States, such as “a former homeland from which one has been forcibly displaced or exiled, or a country or homeland from which one has willingly emigrated” (60). Bardenstein argues that Abu-Jaber’s work *resists* these “prevalent conventions of most nostalgic/ethnic cookbook memoirs” in that it “neither portrays a simplistic or reductive binary between homeland and hostland, constructing the ‘old country’ as a locus of unambiguous authenticity and familiarity, nor the hostland as a watered-down, assimilated, or inauthentic version of ‘the real thing’ back home” (160). Her memoirs also resist nostalgic expectations that *readers* might bring to them, presenting them with complex and complicated portrayals of the cultures of both the United States and Jordan.

This representational complexity may well spring from the author’s own identity. It is important to keep in mind that Abu-Jaber is not a first-generation immigrant from the Arab world who has taken up residency in the United States, nor is she simply a second-generation Arab American. In addition to her ethnically and religiously mixed heritage, she is also what sociologists David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken have called a *third culture kid* and thus a person whose childhood is spent navigating worlds that are significantly different culturally and who builds emotional relationships with both of these cultures, while not having full ownership in either of them (17). Cultural dislocation has very different effects on adults, who have formed their identity in a relatively stable home culture, than on children, who are confronted with the challenge of forming their identity amid often conflicting cultural patterns and norms (56). As a result of these various and often conflicting influences, third culture kids tend to build private “third cultures” from available cultural components—and they continue to inhabit these private spaces as adults. All of this is the case for Abu-Jaber, and her memoirs use *food* as a narrative tool to convey to readers the felt reality of that private world.

Before I move on to show how exactly this is achieved in *The Language of Baklava*, I want to shed light on the fact that narrating food in a literary text is not without its challenges. Given the popularity of culinary narratives, it is easy to forget how remarkable it is that they exist at all, that it is in fact possible to convey to a reader the sensual and affective experience of preparing and beholding food, or the bodily process of

ingesting and savoring it. In real life, we are embodied beings who relate to the things we eat (or refuse to eat) with all our senses. Taste and smell are the ones that might first come to mind, but research has shown that visual appearance is equally important, and that even texture and sound play a major role in our judgment and enjoyment of food (Stuckey 11). Given that reading is a purely visual activity, it seems logical that a drastically impoverished sensual input would lead to a drastically impoverished culinary experience. But this assumption does not do justice to the power of the human imagination or to the capacity of literary texts to feed that imagination.

Gabrielle Starr reminds us that, aside from visual imagery, such texts can contain “several kinds of nonvisual imagery,” among them “olfactory, concerning smell and sometimes taste; haptic, concerning grasp and touch; motor/kinesthetic, concerning movement and sometimes proprioception (perception of one’s own body position); gustatory, concerning taste” (276). Like visual imagery, nonvisual imagery triggers “mental images” in readers, allowing them “to have the subjective experience of sensation without corresponding sensory input” (276). Taste and smell, Starr explains, are the most “difficult to evoke linguistically,” which is why readers need “help ... in making these evocations” (285). Not only will the intensity of their mental images depend on what Elaine Scarry has called the “vivacity” (9) of sensory imagery, but the multi-dimensionality of that imagery is also crucial. As Starr points out, “multisensory imagery gives access not to something like the ‘real’ complexity of experience but to aspects of the ways our minds *internally represent* experiences” (288, emphasis in original).

Once we take all this into account, we begin to realize that when it comes to literary representation of culinary experiences, it is in fact an advantage that, in real life, “a lot of what we think of as taste comes through the four other senses” (Stuckey 11). It also becomes clear that the authors of culinary memoirs do well to include vivid multisensory imagery if they want to engage readers in their stories. Abu-Jaber may not have been aware of the underlying cognitive processes when she sat down to reimagine her past, but as a storyteller and professional cook, she had the knowledge and ability to translate food into language that goes far beyond simple description. In *The Language of Baklava*, she aims to immerse readers in a story about cultural hybridity through the vivid evocation of culinary fusion.

Recollections and Recipes in *The Language of Baklava*

The Language of Baklava opens with a Foreword by the author, in which Abu-Jaber explains that her childhood was made up of stories that “were often in some way about food, and the food always turned out to be about something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love” (n.p.). The book is a compilation of those family stories and to her, “the truth of stories does not

lie in their factual precision, but in their emotional core” (n.p.). This focus in the affective essence of recollection makes good sense since, as cognitive narratologist Patrick Colm Hogan reminds us, emotional memories are “implicit” memories. “When an emotional memory is activated,” writes Hogan, “we may or may not think of the event with which it is associated. Rather, we feel the emotion” (*Affective 5*). If the associated event is related to food, those memories are also “preserved in our bodily senses long after our intelligence has lost sight of them” (Gilroy 100). Abu-Jaber freely admits that she has “honed or altered” these culinary events “to give them the curve of stories” (n.p.). Not every detail may have taken place exactly as it is narrated, but what is true and genuine, she insists, is her emotional memory of a given meal and moment.

This focus on emotion may be the reason why Abu-Jaber tells her story in present tense, an unusual choice for a memoir which, by definition, recounts experiences of the past. Autodiegetic present-tense narration has been labeled logically impossible by narratologists since “the simultaneous present does not allow for a plausible time of narration” (Huber 69), but it gives readers a high sense of immediacy and presence in the storyworld. The narrative of the memoir opens in *medias res* when Abu-Jaber is six years old, but it is not food that takes central stage on the first pages. Rather, it is her mixed heritage and her eye-rolling delight when she visits a TV show with her extended family, and the moderator “crashes” into the surname on her name tag. While the man tries to wrap his tongue around the unfamiliar Arab words, the girl cannot stop laughing because she knows precisely why he selected her: “I’ve got green eyes and pale skin, so evidently he feels I must speak English unlike the rest of the row” (3). Her mother, a blond, blue-eyed, white American has passed on most of her physical attributes to her oldest daughter and so, unlike her siblings, Abu-Jaber grows up “not looking Arab” but “very much American” (5).⁵ In her memoirs and elsewhere, she has affirmed that “it really is amazing what a difference a little bit of pigment can make on a person’s experience” (“Race, Food”). For her, “not looking Arab” means different things in the United States and in Jordan, but it always adds a layer of confusion because her father is so adamant that his children are “good Arab-girls” (*Language 194*).

Ghassan Saleh Abu-Jaber goes by the name of Bud in Syracuse, New York, where Abu-Jaber spends the first six years of her childhood, and that is about the extent of his assimilation. Abu-Jaber calls her father “a sweet, clueless immigrant” (4) who learns English “from soaking in the language at work” (5) and who tries to haggle with a clerk at Sears. The family home is “filled with the food, language, music, and overbearing relatives of Jordan” (Abu-Jaber, “Race, Food”) and it is the preparation of food that keeps Bud anchored in the foreign world that surrounds it. Not only does he work as a line cook to support his family, but he also happily prepares *shish kabob* and other Middle Eastern dishes at home to the delight of his youngest daughter who “happily totes the bloody

kabobs from the block to the marinade of garlic, rosemary, vinegar, and olive oil,” knowing that

shish kabob means that there will be coolers and ice chests, blankets and salads, pita bread, iced tea, salty braided cheese, hummus, maybe a visit to Rudy’s stand, where they dip the scoops of ice cream into a kind of chocolate that hardens to a shell. Maybe our mother will bring a frozen pound cake, because who wants to bake anything in this heat?

(6)

This is the first time Abu-Jaber mentions the preparation of food in the book, and she immediately places it within a social and communal context, since in her family making shish kabob means:

there will be sisters and cousins and aunties and uncles and even more cousins, because there’s no telling who’s just “comeover,” meaning come over from the old country.... They’ll be hungry because everyone who “comesover” is hungry: for home, for family, for the old smells and touches and tastes.

(6)

Family is important, she stresses here, important in a way that is antithetical to the American idea of the nuclear family and that is inevitably linked to the communal consumption of traditional Middle Eastern food. In this passage, Abu-Jaber embraces precisely the kind of culinary nostalgia that Bardenstein claims is absent from the book, but her enumeration also includes American dietary staples like iced tea, ice cream, and pound cake, suggesting that the “old smells ... and tastes” (6) are being supplemented with new ones, provided by her American mother and grandmother, and the larger surrounding culture.

As in her second memoir and in her novel *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber portrays male Arab immigrants such as her father in ways that are meant to complicate the post-9/11 stereotype of the Muslim man as an irrational, aggressive individual (Fadda-Conrey 2). Like other contemporary Arab American women writers, she tries to “demystify and positivize the figure of the Arab in the Americans’ minds” (Bosch-Vilarrubias 2), working against entrenched Orientalist stereotypes. But this does not mean that she idealizes her father.⁶ Bud is portrayed as a boisterous and imposing man who tries to rule over his three “Arab girls” like a patriarch. But he is also a complex human being filled with hopes, dreams, and his share of disappointments. Like other Arab men in Abu-Jaber’s books, he seems a little lost in the United States, possessed by an acute longing for the place he left behind and by a deep need for the food he used to enjoy there. When he can no longer bear living in the United States and moves his family to Amman, everything changes for his daughter.

At the age of seven, Abu-Jaber is lifted out of the American world she has grown up in and plunged into the Arab culture she has only known in bits and pieces through her father. It is this move to Jordan that distinguishes *The Language of Baklava* from many other culinary memoirs by ethnic American writers. As Bardenstein points out, “Jordan does not remain a fixed ‘still life’ contemplated or longed for from afar” (167). Rather than functioning as a lost place remembered with nostalgic yearning, it is as *present* in the text as Syracuse, narrated in the same present-tense voice with the same degree of immediacy. In fact, now that Arabic culture, language, and food are all around her, it is the United States that becomes a distant memory for Abu-Jaber, a culture sometimes longed for but increasingly forgotten:

It’s as if there’s only a certain amount on space in my brain, and the more space Jordan takes up, the less space there is left for America. Sometimes I lose track of what language I’m in and gibber between the two of them, substituting English words for Arabic and vice versa. My favorite breakfast is no longer pancakes, but bread doused with oil and *zataar*. Just once in a while something reminds me of my former life.... When these moments occur, I stop and think: Am I still an American? It confuses me, because it seems like a kind of unbecoming or rebecoming—to turn into this other Diana—pronounced *Dee-ahna*, a Jordanian girl who has forgotten the taste of fluffernutter sandwiches or Hershey’s bars.

(58)

The language confusions and shifting tastes are typical occurrences in the life of a third culture kid as it navigates significantly different cultural worlds and builds emotional relationships with both (Pollock and Van Reken 17). Although she enjoys living in Amman, Abu-Jaber in fact never completely turns into a “Jordanian girl.” She is both Diana and *Dee-ahna*, and she becomes reasonably proficient in both languages, cultures, and cuisines, building her own third culture from the components. She may claim that she has forgotten the taste of Hershey’s bars, but enjoys the hot chocolate served to children at a “swanky hotel” in Amman (58). The beverage “tastes nothing like my memories of hot powdered cocoa mix,” writes Abu-Jaber, “but it’s much better than the original. It tastes faintly of cherry and cream, and deep inside this, I believe I taste echoes of the sharp, sweet Hershey’s bars of the corner store just down the street from our house in America” (58–59). And so she does in fact have a *sensory* memory of the chocolate bars along with a deep *feeling* of pleasure.

This admission is immediately followed by a recipe for “Sentimental Hot Chocolate” that calls for nutmeg and cinnamon, for “heavy cream” and “semisweet chocolate” (59) without specifying a brand. It is Abu-Jaber’s narrated self for whom this drink is “sentimental,” reminding her of the lost American home, but the recipe is clearly written for readers who

are cultural outsiders to Arab cuisine and insiders to American labels such as “heavy cream.” Abu-Jaber has acknowledged that “Arab-Americans are actually a fairly small percentage” of her readership (*Curled Up*), so we must assume that what she uses to make Arabic culture palatable to her non-Arab readers is what the narratologist Suzanne Keen has called “*ambassadorial strategic empathy*”—a form of authorial empathizing that “*addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end*” (84, italics in original). As the narrative moves on to dishes that might be more challenging to imagine for cultural outsiders, Abu-Jaber puts great effort not only into describing the sensory qualities of those dishes but also into helping such readers to prepare them themselves.

This brings us to the second way in which food is narrated in the memoir. As Pauline Homsy Vinson has noted, each chapter “presents significant scenes of childhood served with an emotionally-charged recipe.” These recipes are often deceptively simple, with short lists of ingredients and even shorter instructions. But the apparent simplicity is complicated by asterixis and explanations of just what exactly is meant by a perhaps unfamiliar ingredient. The recipe for “Amazing Arab Ice Cream” is a good example:

1 teaspoon powdered	¼ teaspoon mastic,*
<i>sahlab</i> * or 1 tablespoon	crushed to powder
cornstarch	1 tablespoon orange
4 cups milk	blossom water*
1 cup heavy cream	Chopped pistachios for
1 ¼ cups sugar	decoration

(57)

This is followed by simple instructions about how to mix it all together, freeze it, beat it, and freeze it again before serving. Then, however, the recipe continues as follows:

* sold in specialty stores

SAHLAB is a white powdery starch made from the ground tuber of an orchid.

MASTIC is a natural resin produced in the Mediterranean from an evergreen shrub of the pistachio tree’s family; it also happens to be excellent for stomach ailments.

ORANGE BLOSSOM WATER, a uniquely fragrant flavored water, is also used to make “white coffee,” a popular Middle Eastern drink made by adding orange blossom water to boiling water and sugar.

(58)

As is clear from these annotations, Abu-Jaber does not expect readers to be familiar with Middle Eastern food or its ingredients. The readers she

is addressing herself to are culinary outsiders who will not know what *sablab* is or *mastic*, and who are unlikely to have orange blossom water in their kitchen pantry or white coffee on their dinner tables. Even English transcriptions of the original Arab names are only used sparingly—readers never learn what “white coffee” is actually called in Jordan, just like they never learn the original name of the “Amazing Arab Ice Cream.”⁷

This constant mediation between the intriguingly “exotic” and the sufficiently familiar is typical for ethnic culinary memoirs. One of their attractions is that they can familiarize readers with experiences and cuisines previously unfamiliar or at least unaccustomed without making the reading experience too challenging or studious. A culinary memoir offers readers a *taste* of a given culture and cuisine, embedded in the personal story of the narrator and making that story quite literally more palatable. As empirical literary scholars Moniek Kuijpers and Frank Hakemulder point out, readers “enjoy the intensity of absorbing experiences” and “they appreciate the special bodily sensations that characterize these experiences” (1). And it is readers’ empathetic relationship with narrators and characters that allows them to feel such bodily sensations. In “Pleasures of the Literary Meal” (2015), Bee Wilson observes that in real life it is considered rude “to stare at someone in the act of eating,” whereas we are free to look and even inhabit another’s act of eating during the process of reading. “Descriptions of people eating,” writes Wilson,

provide something that recipes can never give: closure.... Even the greatest recipe is like a mystery without a solution: we are given the clues and the setup—the ingredients and the method—without the longed-for denouement. What we really want to know is: How did it turn out? Who ate it, and did they enjoy it?

(Wilson)

A crucial function of the ethnic culinary memoir is precisely that—allowing readers to imaginatively inhabit unknown culinary pleasures.

To provide an example, chapter 6 of *The Language of Baklava* features the recipe for “Mad Genius Knaffea,” complete with an explanation of two of its ingredients, *Kadayif*—a “kind of shredded phyllo”—and *Alawi*—a “mild, sweet cheese available in import food stores” (120). But since that might not tell readers very much, and since there are no pictures accompanying the recipe, it is Abu-Jaber’s own subjective experience of it that makes it sensual for readers:

The shredded phyllo dough is crisp and brown, crackling with hot, rose-scented syrup. Nestled within, like a naughty secret, is the melting layer of sweet cheese.... It’s so hot that it steams in your mouth, and at first you eat it with just the tip of your teeth. Then the layers of crisp and sweet and soft intermingle, a series of surprises.

It's so rich and dense that you can only eat a little bit and then it is over and the *knafeea* is just a pleasant memory—like a lovely dream that you forget a few seconds after you wake. But for a few seconds, you knew you were eating *knafeea*.

(118)

This passage, written in an ambiguous second-person voice that might either be Abu-Jaber talking to herself or addressing the reader, is a perfect example of the use of multisensory imagery. The first sentence already mixes haptic (“crisp;” “hot”), visual (“brown”), auditory (“crackling”), and olfactory (“rose-scented”) imagery. In a next step, gustatory imagery is added (“steams in your mouth”; “sweet and soft”). As their eyes scan these words, readers create mental images through an involuntary process involving the mirror neuron system that neuroscientists call “embodied simulation” (Gallese 441). In Wilson’s terms, this is the moment of satisfying “closure” for readers in that it not only answers the questions of how the dish turned out, who ate it, and whether they enjoyed it, but also allows them to imaginatively *share* the enjoyment. Empirical research has shown that “considering a food engenders spontaneous simulations of the taste of that food item, which by itself is enough to produce satiation” (Larson et al. 188), and so we must assume that reading through this passage leads to measurable physical effects. But readers are also led to simulate the short duration and evanescence of that effect, so that all that is left is “a pleasant memory”—and thus the sensual and emotional residue of the event.

It should be noted that by the time Abu-Jaber treats readers to this culinary experience in her memoir, the family has already returned to the United States. And as she promises in her Foreword, the story about the delicious *knafeea* is not only about a fleeting moment of culinary joy but also about something bigger. It is the center of a chapter about a New Year’s Eve spent at the house of her Uncle Hal (Hilal) and his wife Rachel. Like Abu-Jaber’s own mother, Aunt Rachel is a white American, but she is the one who makes the Arabic *knafeea* for the entire multicultural family, having learned the recipe from her mother-in-law—Abu-Jaber’s grandmother. A Palestinian who was forced to live in exile, the grandmother died at the age of 48, when most of her sons were already living in the United States in pursuit of better lives. “Now the *knafeea* calms Bud and Uncle Hal down. It makes them remember their mother, and they forget again about being surrounded by Americans” (119). But like the enjoyment of the sweet itself, those moments of both remembering and forgetting are fleeting.

It is only at the very end of the memoir, when Abu-Jaber is in her twenties and has returned from her second stay in Jordan, that her father finally realizes his dream—to open his own restaurant in the United States. But it is not serving, as one might expect, Middle Eastern specialties or any other kind of “ethnic food.” Rather, Bud runs the grill at a

driving range, “serving rows of burgers, sizzling French fries, blistering hot dogs, and grilled cheese sandwiches” (324). In the end, Abu-Jaber declares, “the type of food doesn’t matter so much. It’s cooking it and feeding people and watching them eat, keeping them alive in the desert of the world” (325). But as poetic as that sounds, two years later, her father can no longer bear being tied down in a country he still perceives as foreign and spends his life flying back and forth between the United States and Jordan. Abu-Jaber, meanwhile, has learned to accept that she, too, is “a Bedouin” (326) who carries her own, hybrid, third culture around with her.

Conclusion

Abu-Jaber’s choice to narrate her life experiences as an ethnically and culturally hybrid individual through her relationship with food may be the reason why her books have become so popular among literary foodies who are looking for an immersive reading experience that allows them to be entertained and inspired while also learning something about another cuisine, community, and culture. It is a culture that, in the United States, has been viewed with a degree of suspicion and misconception that only increased after the terror attacks on 9/11 (Jamal and Naber 3) and that continues to be constructed as “barbaric” and “backward” (Fadda-Conrey 2). While Abu-Jaber may have written her memoirs, “to recollect her memories” and “search for her identity” (57), as Tabačková and other scholars have claimed, she also uses her memoir to make Arabic culture more palatable to her non-Arab readers. While the culinary enjoyment of the memoir can be a solely imaginary one, readers can also recreate it themselves by cooking the dishes and thereby creating their own closure. In that sense, the book offers readers opportunities for an engagement that lasts beyond the immediate reading experience.

The sensual evocation of food, then, is not only a means for the author to negotiate her own identity but also an invitation to readers to negotiate their own subject positions and attitudes toward Arab American culture and subjectivity, which is portrayed as complex, heterogeneous, hybrid, contradictory, and evolving. *The Language of Baklava* thus aims to transcend the problematic binary logics of Orientalist discourse that continues to dominate American conceptualizations of Arab Americans. As Abu-Jaber has noted, “when you’re in the midst of it, you come to understand that ‘race’ is a loose social construct” (“Race, Food”). Empirical research has shown that fiction which invites readers to inhabit the point of view of a Muslim American woman can reduce prejudice against Arab Americans and decrease intergroup anxiety (Johnson et al. 578) and reading a culinary memoir may have similar effects. Abu-Jaber has explained that her father was never good at listening, and that “his cooking gave him a way of having a conversation” (“Race, Food”). *The Language of Baklava* continues that culinary conversation by moving it

into the literary realm and using it to wet readers' appetites—even those of readers who are not very good at listening—for a story about ethnic ambiguity and multiple belonging within and beyond the United States. Whether they end up cooking the featured recipes or not, the emotional memory of the reading experience may stay with them long after they have closed the book.

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Notes

- 1 The Standard American Diet (SAD) is marked by calorie-dense and nutrient-poor food and beverage choices such as refined and processed “fast food,” soft drinks, and packaged snacks (Grotto and Zied).
- 2 A 2017 study shows that the prevalence of certain types of food in U.S. neighborhoods is dependent on socio-demographic factors and that “more exotic cuisines, like Vietnamese and Cuban, remain largely confined to immigrant enclaves” (Park 365). It is quite telling that these cuisines are labeled “foreign” and “exotic” in the study itself, regardless of the diversity of the U.S. population.
- 3 See Abarca (2012) and Warnes (2004) for explorations of food-related discourse in Latinx literature and African American literature, respectively.
- 4 For a discussion of cookbook memoirs authored by Jewish and Arab Middle Eastern exiles, see Bardenstein’s “Transmissions Interrupted” (2002).
- 5 This recognition echoes Moroccan American novelist Laila Lalami’s question of whether she is considered “a more desirable immigrant because [she does] not look Muslim” (144). It also resonates with Jennifer Ho’s exploration of “racial ambiguity” in the final chapter of this volume.
- 6 According to Said, orientalist discourse represents the “oriental other” as constant, irrational, homogenous, and backwards while positioning Western culture as rational and progressive (12).
- 7 Homsí Vinson has noted that “when an Arab food is commonly referred to by its Greek name in America, Abu-Jaber opts to use that common name,” including “*baklava*,” which “is called ‘*baklawá*’ (with a ‘w’ not a ‘v’) by Arabs.” This might be “strategically designed to reach an American readership,” but it “might be unsettling to some Arab readers who are too often subjected to Western misrepresentations or erasures of Arab culture.”

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