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**Imagining Sittee: Constructions of Homelands and Grandmother
Narratives in Arab American Literature**

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by

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Report

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Dedication

To my parents.

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Abstract

Imagining Sittee: Constructions of Homelands and Grandmother Narratives in Arab American Literature

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This report examines the use of grandmother figures in the construction of imagined communities in Arab American literature. Through the lens of diaspora studies, it argues that grandmother figures become integral in the creation of an Arab American imagined community based on two main tropes: a theoretical collapse between notions of patriotism and the maternal figure (in which the homeland becomes the Motherland) and the tendency of second-generation Arab American authors to connect their immigrant grandmothers to ethnic homelands. In exploring this connection, the report argues that the creation of an Arab American imagined community is necessitated by anti-Arab racism in the United States and the need for the community's authors to be seen in tandem with the literary traditions of other ethnic minorities in America. The report problematizes the

imagined homeland by arguing that it is constructed on the basis of simplistic juxtapositions between different generations within the Arab American community, and ends by examining the anxiety that is generated when this juxtaposition and the imagined community are threatened.

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“If a person could be a country, then Sittee was Lebanon to me.” – Therese Saliba

“When your mama talked, she laughed a laugh—it brought Lebanon back to me.” – Alia Yunis

Since the publication in 1993 of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*, the novel which many scholars identify as heralding a new age of Arab American writing,¹ the Arab American literary community has released only two works that focus on grandmother figures: the collected anthology of essays *Food For Our Grandmothers* in 1994 and Alia Yunis’s novel *The Night Counter* in 2009. This essay performs a comparative reading of the two works in order to situate the above rendered quotes within the context of diaspora studies. How may the quotes by Yunis and Saliba, a contributing writer of *Food For Our Grandmothers*, be understood in terms of the Arab American diaspora’s connection to the Middle East? Why, in forming this connection, do Saliba and Yunis formulate the link to their country of origin through the figure of the grandmother? And what are the consequences that arise from such a connection?

The above questions become particularly important in light of the comment by Lisa Suhair Majaj that the *Arabian Jazz* era of Arab American writing views the community’s ethnicity as a “starting point from which to redefine and resituate concepts of identity” (Majaj, 326). Majaj contrasts this comment against earlier Arab American writing which, as she argues, viewed ethnic identity as “an end goal to be celebrated.” Formulating this distinction in order to argue for a particular concern on the part of the new generation of writers to forge connections with other ethnic groups “across cultural

¹ See Steven Salaita’s “Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam: Cultural Negotiation in the Fiction of Joseph Geha and Diana Abu-Jaber.”

divides” (Majaj 326),² Majaj unwittingly points to an inherent contradiction in the treatment of grandmothers in Arab American literature. At the same time as the community’s authors invest themselves in the navigation of more than one culture, they persistently depict grandmothers as stock characters incapable of moving beyond the expression of ethnicity associated with the ‘old’ pattern of writing. This contradiction is demonstrated in the quotes above as well as in the community’s curious stance on publishing about grandmothers: although *Food For Our Grandmothers* and *The Night Counter* are the only two works to center on *sittee* figures,³ they are far from being the only works that feature them. In Randa Jarrar’s *A Map of Home*, for instance, the young protagonist’s navigation of Palestinian, Egyptian, Greek, and American heritage is starkly contrasted against *sittee*, who appears in her Palestinian village, “roll[ing] cabbage leaves with rice and meat” (Jarrar 101). *Sittee* is illiterate and, unlike her granddaughter who moves from one country to the next, she is never seen outside of her house. In Frances Khirallah Noble’s “The Hike to Heart Rock”, *sittee*’s appearance is equally short and equally stereotypical. As the protagonist explores his sexuality and the American landscape through which his extended family hike, *sittee* never leaves the family cabin

² Majaj supports her argument by stating that Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye and Lebanese-American author David Williams have written about Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and South Asians. Like the example she provides of Williams’s writing, in which the death of an Arab girl in Beirut is connected to the torture of a young boy in a Warsaw ghetto, these connections are frequently forged on the mutual recognition of suffering. In a more American context, Diana Abu-Jaber’s “My Elizabeth” connects a Palestinian-American girl’s struggle to come to terms with her hyphenated identity and with the erasure of her homeland with the problems faced by her Native-American friend. These connections are examined over a decade after the publication of Majaj’s article by Steven Salaita who maintains that the connections Arab American writers develop with other ethnic minority groups in the US are the most effective way to facilitate the inclusion of community’s literature in the academy. Salaita uses this to argue that Arab American writing must be taught as a national literature of the US within English departments and not, as the tendency has been, as an offshoot of Arabic literature within Middle Eastern departments. (See Salaita’s *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures and Politics*.)

³ While there are several words for “grandmother” in Arabic, I use “*sittee*” throughout this essay because of the predominance of its use amongst Arab American authors of Levantine backgrounds.

and, despite her health condition, “[scrubs] the kitchen” (Noble 269), “[sweeps] the tennis court everyday with a push broom”, and “[hauls] buckets of water to wash the front walk” (Noble 272). Eventually, the protagonist’s father drives her back to the city and, by the end of the story, she disappears from the protagonist’s thoughts altogether. In Mohja Kahf’s “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Bathroom Sink at Sears,” sittee performs ritual Islamic ablutions in the heart of Western commerce, leaning her “plump, matronly” arms against the sink (Kahf, 26), and communicating with disapproving American women only through her granddaughter because she “speaks no English” (Kahf, 27).

Such associations as the ones that arise in Jarrar, Noble, and Kahf’s depictions of sittees must taken into consideration before the Arab American community’s claims of re-defining ethnicity can be taken seriously. To that end, the aims of this essay are two-fold: to fill a gap in the scholarship about sittees by exploring the reasons behind their persistent association with countries of origin and traditional domesticity, and to problematize these associations in light of Majaj’s claims that the community is moving beyond simplistic depictions of ethnic heritage. In order to do so, the essay will examine the manner in which grandmother figures are utilized in the construction of imagined communities in *Food For Our Grandmothers* and *The Night Counter*. While such an argument can be constructed about the works of Jarrar, Noble, Kahf or others of their like, my choice to focus on these two works is based on the theoretical and practical applications that arise in their examination. The only two works to engage sittee characters at length, the texts provide more room than would otherwise be available to explore the ways in which grandmothers are represented. In addition, by continuing to

perpetuate similar stereotypes as those that arise in works where sittees are only marginal characters, the works raise the stakes where these representations are concerned. Not only are the grandmothers in the anthology and the novel treated stereotypically, in other words, but this treatment is extended to them even as they occupy central roles within the narratives.

In order to examine the problems associated with these stereotypes, my essay will form a connection between theories of diaspora, scholarship on Arab American immigration patterns and literature, and the texts at hand. In doing so, I will rely on Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community as a space conceived of by its members as one in which they function in communion with others (Anderson 6). Anderson builds this argument to reflect on nation states, stating that imagined communities become necessary in light of citizens' need to feel connected to each other and, in "communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact" (Anderson 6), to do so in spite of the fact that it is impossible for them to meet. In the case of the Arab American community, the need to act in communion is generated both by anti-Arab racism in the United States and the desire to be seen in tandem with other ethnic minority writers in the American publishing scene. Unlike the nation states discussed by Anderson, however, Arab Americans must build the community that allows them to perform these functions outside of their countries of origin and, in order to subsume differences among its members, by stressing ethnic (and not national) similarities. Utilizing this framework, then, I will argue that grandmothers become a pivotal part of the Arab American imagined community based on two main tropes: a theoretical collapse between notions of patriotism and the maternal figure (in which the homeland becomes

the Motherland) and the fact that, in both texts I examine, the grandmother figures are immigrants—a factor that leads their second-generation family members to see them as tangible connections to their country of origin. Through my exploration of these topics, I will argue that Arab American writers identify with the homeland through grandmother figures at the same time as they construct simplistic binaries in their writing that associate these figures with a backwards conservatism. After examining the problems associated with such a contradiction in *Food For Our Grandmothers*, I will analyze the departure the Yunis represents by contrasting the impositions of stereotypes onto her sittee figure with moments in which sittee speaks for herself, and will end by examining the anxiety that is generated when sittees threaten the imagined narrative by acting outside the scope of traditionalism.

The Imagined Community in Arab American Literature

The context of Carol Bardenstein's analysis of the prickly pear cactus within Israel and Palestine may appear to be far removed from a discussion about Arab American literature. Yet the analysis, in its deconstruction of the nature of symbols, proves particularly useful in understanding how sittee figures are appropriated (as symbols and otherwise) in Arab American narratives. Bardenstein's analysis of the prickly pear tree reveals it to hold meanings that vary according to the factions involved in its perception. A connection to Israeli efforts to know the land, the tree becomes to Palestinians indicative of the effort to remain "steadfast, rooted, and resilient" (Bardenstein 14) in the face of occupation. Most ironic about these changing meanings is the fact that the most nationalistic of trees where either camp is involved is one that, as Bardenstein indicates, "was transplanted from Mexico in the 1700s". In demystifying the

indigenusness of the tree, as well as revealing its contested use in Israeli-Palestinian discourse, Bardenstein reveals a lack of stability in the cactus that marks it as more deeply implicated in the collective memory used in its construction than in the harboring of true or inherent meaning.

The destabilization of meaning that Bardenstein performs on the tree, one that thus points to the shifting nature of the symbol as a concept, offers a particularly useful framework for understanding grandmother figures as the ‘trees’ of Arab American literature. Much like the prickly pear myth is constructed in order to “[mobilize]...respective discourses” in Palestine, grandmother figures become one way in which the Arab American community is implicated in what Majaj terms “politics of recognition” (Majaj 322). In formulating her argument about these politics, Majaj relies on an often-noted distinction that separates the Arab American community’s immigration into two main patterns. Contrasted against the batch of immigrants who arrive in the United States in the late 1800s and who seek assimilation at the cost of suppressing ethnic identity, Majaj identifies Arab immigrants to the US who arrive after World War II as beginning a trend of “ethnic celebration and assertion” (Majaj 322) among the diaspora. This trend is one that can be connected to each batch’s respective reasons for immigration. While the earlier influx arrived in search mainly of economic opportunity, a significant number of immigrants within the second batch relocated because they were “driven out of their homes as a result of regional conflict” with Israel, the first Gulf War, or civil wars within individual countries (Suleiman 9). Arriving with a significantly more politicized world view than their pre-WWII equivalents, the second batch of Arab immigrants also became implicated in mounting anti-Arab sentiment within the US,

much of which, ironically, was generated as a result of the very reasons that lead to their immigration (American support for Israel and involvement in the Gulf War being two prominent examples).

Beyond the sociological particularities that arise from such a distinction, the pattern Majaj analyzes is necessary in the context of my argument in identifying the literature of the *Arabian Jazz* age—and of symbolic sittings—as one that is markedly influenced by the sentiments of the second wave of Arab American immigration. In reaction to mounting racial tension in the US, and to such political developments in the Middle East as the 1967 defeat to Israel, the second wave of Arab American immigrants’ “politics of recognition” becomes one deeply invested in what Avtah Brah labels the “construction of the we” (Brah 444). The need for this construction is particularly true given what Majaj points out: no longer composed overwhelmingly of Christians from Mount Lebanon, the second batch of Arab immigrants usher in an age in which Arab Americans are simultaneously at their least homogenous state and most desirous of the construction of a unifying narrative. Holding little in common with each other, the Arab American diaspora is thus made to aspire towards “a confluence of narratives” (Brah 444) that stresses, realistically or otherwise, a common ethnic identity and homeland. In the construction of this imagined homeland, Arab Americans depend less on the reality of the diaspora’s heterogeneity than on the propagation of collective memory. In doing so, the community implicates itself in an inherent contradiction: by relying on an imagined homeland of ethnic unity, Arab Americans construct a fixed identity for themselves that serves as a survival tactic in the face of anti-Arab racism in the US; in *constructing* this

fixed identity, the community's imagined homeland becomes increasingly removed from the reality of life in their countries of origin (Brah 444).

The impact of this construction on the literature of Arab America is one that must be considered in light of Steven Salaita's comment that the community needs to "borrow" from the "aesthetics and intentions" of writers in the Middle East in the construction of its literary narratives. In many ways, the manner in which Salaita constructs this argument is similar to Majaj's examination of the community as a whole: faced with the homogenizing force of the European novel, the medium which Salaita identifies as preferred by the community, Arab Americans insert these cultural markers in order to identify their writing as ethnically their own. While Salaita never stops to identify the nature of these markers, or why Arab Americans may wish to make use of them, he does state that they become a feature which marks the literature of the diaspora as simultaneously fluid and "bound to essentialist identity politics" (Salaita 425). What this appears to suggest is that the Arab American community simultaneously stresses its ethnicity in order to make connections to other traditions of ethnic literature in the US (Salaita 426), and contextualizes these ethnic markers within a medium of writing (the novel) which eases its acceptance into mainstream American publishing.⁴

This attitude is one that can be connected to Salman Rushdie's view of diasporic literature as one that perpetually negotiates the urge to look back to the historic cultural entity from which its subjects emerge (i.e. "borrow[ing]" from the homeland) and the recognition that this desire will "not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost" (Rushdie 428). Rushdie identifies this sense of loss as one that propels writing and

⁴ It is interesting that Salaita does not consider the possibility that it is precisely these ethnic markers that make Arab American literature more consumable for an American public seeking exoticism.

as one that is temporarily satisfied by the use of the imagined homeland in literature. While Rushdie admits that this impulse is one that colors the homelands of diasporic literatures as significantly more fantastic than real, the problem is exaggerated even further in the case of Arab America. The authors that Salaita includes in his analysis, and the ones I make use of in my own, are not—as Rushdie himself is—immigrants from the homeland. Given that they are thus incapable of having a direct connection to their country of origin, these authors must rely on external figures—or, more accurately, external collective memory—in order to construct both the “loss” they attempt to recover and the imagined homelands through which they construct this recovery. Never having experienced the myth of the prickly pear cactus themselves, so to speak, Arab American authors must build a myth upon a myth, and it is within this scope that the examination of grandmother figures in *Food For Our Grandmothers* and *The Night Counter* becomes all the more pivotal.

Our Grandmothers, Ourselves: Speaking for Sittes in Food For Our Grandmothers

Published in 1994, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* is described by its editor, Joanna Kadi, as belonging to the same category of works as Gloria Anzaldua’s *The Bridge Called My Back* (1981) and *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian-American Women* (1989).⁵ The anthology, which Kadi connects to feminist traditions established by other ethnic minority groups in North America, combines a variety of mediums including short

⁵ Kadi never elaborates on the connections she sees between these texts and her own. Considering the genre of *Food For Our Grandmothers*, the connection may be understood as based on the precedence each text sets as feminist publications within their respective ethnic groups. This is particularly true given that the anthologies depart from a strict reliance on academic essays and combine a variety of mediums instead.

memoirs, poetry, and essays and features the writings of more than twenty contributors, all of Middle Eastern descent. Connecting the idea behind the anthology with the discrimination faced by Arabs in America, Kadi maintains that the work aims to help those “struggling with issues of culture, identity, history, and activism” (Kadi xvii), and emphasizes that it combines writings that emerge from various generations, socio-economic groups, and sexualities. Separated into five sections, each of which begins with a recipe and is named after a traditional component of Middle Eastern cuisine (Olives, Bread, Thyme, etc...) the anthology explores in its respective sections issues of family ties, nostalgia for ethnic homelands, anti-Arab racism, and the negotiation of Arab and American identities in the lives of its writers.

The work’s emphasis on food, demonstrated in its title and framework alike, is one that must be examined further, particularly in light of Kadi’s comment that the anthology attempts to “give something back to our community”. At the same time as it situates the work within a particular ethnic identity, in other words, Kadi’s statement—and the title of the book—form an inextricable connection between the notion of this identity and the food of the community. In explaining how she came up with the title, Kadi complicates this connection further when she contrasts her struggle to settle on a subtitle for the work, a problem she associates with a reluctance to classify women of various Middle Eastern backgrounds under the heading of Arab American or Arab Canadian, against the ease with which the main title “came to [her]” (Kadi xx). Given Kadi’s disinclination to lump the contributors of the work under one heading, how may her willingness to associate sittings with the community’s food—and thus, potentially, with the community’s very identity—be understood? In her analysis of Middle Eastern

cookbooks written after immigration to the United States, Bardenstein's exploration of the confluence between memory and food provides one framework to understand this discrepancy. Labeling the cookbooks she examines "memoirs with recipes" (Bardenstein 357), Bardenstein argues that food becomes a particularly tangible way to construct an imagined community "in the face of being powerless to bring back or return to [the homeland]" (Bardenstein, 353-354). Formulating this argument on the basis of food's ability to unite people over a shared task, and to do so in a way that stimulates the brain's association of taste and memory, Bardenstein makes her most pivotal point when she states that such food-driven recollections of the homeland rely on a distinct collapse between the maternal figure (i.e. the figure traditionally associated with the production of food) and the homeland that is then recreated through the food produced by the maternal figure. In the case of *Food For Our Grandmothers*, this may be applied in reading the act of "giving back" mentioned by Kadi as one in which both food *and* the grandmother figures who produce it are offered to readers for the sake of constructing an Arab American homeland.

The application of Bardenstein's theory onto *Food for Our Grandmothers* becomes further complicated in light of the latter work's utilization of second-generation Arab American authors. Unlike the subjects of Bardenstein's own analysis, only a small minority of the anthology's authors are capable, through their status as immigrants, of constructing imagined homelands through first-person recollection. Instead, the contributors of *Food For Our Grandmothers* must mediate the development of their homeland narratives through external figures, a factor that makes Kadi's associations of sittees with food all the more pivotal. In the anthology, it is the sittees who have first

person recollections of the homeland, and it is because of this that sittees come to stand for the homelands themselves in their granddaughters' construction of imagined communities. Like the food they produce, the presence of sittees is necessitated by family members who imagine their grandmothers' identities and the homelands they represent as "intact, authentic, and unproblematized" (Bardenstein 359). While any imagined stability is problematic in and of itself, the stability associated with sittees in the text is even more alarming in its exclusive association with conservatism. Despite Kadi's declaration that the work's feminist spirit is inspired by strong grandmothers, both the framing provided for the anthology and a significant number of stories within it appear unable to separate these very sittees from passivity, stereotypical femininity, and enforced domestic behavior. Arguing for the appropriateness of the anthology's focus on cuisine, Kadi's statement that the work honors the "Arabic food that many of [the grandmothers] made for us daily" (Kadi xx), may be interpreted in two lights. On the one hand, the juxtaposition of sittee-reminiscent recipes at the beginning of each section may indicate the inclusion of multiple sides of womanhood, a celebration of women's ability to occupy both the domestic sphere of the recipes and the intellectual one of the essays that follows them. On the other, Kadi's declaration that the anthology is a way to "give something back to our grandmothers" and that it "offers [them] *appropriate* food" (Kadi xx), may indicate a difference when it comes to the sphere(s) each set of women is allowed to occupy. Not content, in other words, to associate grandmothers with food and domesticity, Kadi appears to also suggest that it is only the community's youth (granddaughters) who are capable of occupying the sphere of intellectualism in the first place, and who are concerned with or capable of achieving the spirit of feminism that

inspires the work. More disturbing still is the suggestion that this feminism is then given in reward to sittees who spend their lives, for lack of a better term, stuck in homeland backwardness (the kitchen).

The anthology's interest in constructing a homeland based on sittee figures and in contrasting this homeland to the realities of Arab American life becomes particularly evident in individual authors' recollections about the grandmothers of their childhood. Kadi begins this pattern when, in her introduction, the only description of her grandmother she provides is of the sittee's "work-worn hands, busy hands...kneading dough for Syrian bread" (Kadi xiv). Associating the sittee with perhaps the most stereotypical location (kitchen) and act (cooking ethnic food) where the representation of Arab women is concerned, the description is paralleled, a few pages later, in Therese Saliba's reminiscences about her family. Like the description of Kadi's grandmother in the act of baking, Saliba's presentation of her sittee as living in "a world of foreign foods, strange language, incense, ritual, bazaar, and bizarre" (Saliba 9) compromises the humanity of the grandmother for the sake of inscribing her body within a space of domesticity and cultural Otherness. For Saliba, the grandmother's domesticity, and more cynically her value, appear to be inextricably linked to the fact that she "came from the Old Country" (Saliba 8). Different because she is an immigrant, in other words, the sittee and her 'Arabness' are distinguished from the granddaughter's 'Arab Americanness' by the latter's stress on her "thick and heavy" accent, use of "unfamiliar words", and utilization of "foreign flavors" and seasonings in her food (Saliba 8). Through these descriptions, Saliba, who recalls thinking of her grandmother's homeland as a place "where everything was dusted and worn," emerges as linking her grandmother to the

Zizekian notion of the “Nation Thing”. In Saliba’s recollections, it is the sittee figure who is seen, as in Vijay Mishra’s argument about the Nation Thing, as something that “simply *is*” (Mishra, 448), and what the grandmother “simply *is*” appears to be limited to her difference and exoticism.

Saliba’s exploitation of her grandmother’s exotic origins becomes further problematized in light of what the author knows about her sittee’s upbringing. Indeed, what is most curious about Saliba’s narrative is her simultaneous recognition of the French influences in her grandmother’s life and her inability to take these references into consideration when constructing a simplistic binary of Arab/Arab America. Depicting her grandmother as smelling like “lemon jasmine...from Lebanon and Jean Naté ...from France” (Saliba 10), and recalling an instance in which her grandmother read aloud from a letter written in French, Saliba makes only one attempt to analyze her grandmother’s bicultural upbringing. This attempt, one in which Saliba connects her grandmother’s “excessive [relishing] of the French language and Jean Naté perfume” (Saliba 11) to a speech by Etel Adnan that denounces the French colonial system in Lebanon, becomes an opportunity that Saliba misses to connect the women’s narratives through their respective hyphenated upbringings (French and Lebanese, Arab and American). It is precisely because the imagined community is predicated upon sittee’s Lebaneseness, and not her navigation of more than one culture, that Saliba is unable to form this connection. What Saliba does, instead, is state that, “if a woman could be a land, then Sittee was Lebanon to me” (Saliba 10), a statement she then supports by demonstrating her grandmother’s link to the country as melodramatic (sittée’s “clouded eyes watered” at the mention of Lebanon) and juvenile (sittée lapses into frequent “ramblings” about the country). What

this achieves, in effect, is a practical application of Mishra's theory that imagined homelands are constructed without regard for the reality of life in the homelands themselves. In this case, the reality of Saliba's sittee is one that situates her as navigating more than one culture and as doing so with a sophistication that Saliba leaves little room for in her persistent focus on her grandmother's domesticity. In Saliba's memoir and memory alike, the 'real' grandmother/homeland matters little in the face of the 'imagined' grandmother/homeland that the narrative is constructing

The use of Saliba's grandmother as an emblem of an imagined community becomes reflected, on a literal level, when she is used as a gateway for her granddaughter's exploration of an Araby-like land. Much of Saliba's appreciation for her grandmother, particularly at the time of her childhood, appears related to the break sittee is capable of providing from the normalcy and blandness of American life. This is particularly true given the language Saliba uses to describe visits to her grandmother's house. Taking place during the weekends, and thus far removed from the 'seriousness' of the workweek, sittee's house appears to operate on a different temporal plane altogether. A type of fantasy-land, in other words, the house becomes the location through which Saliba can wade to find "relics" (Saliba 10), and in which these "relics" (in reality, her grandmother's hairbrush and toiletries) only serve to enhance the un-human "air of antiquity" associated with the grandmother figure. The fact that Saliba recounts viewing these objects through a child's eyes may certainly provide one explanation for the language used, yet it is pivotal to note that their exoticizing tone persists throughout the different stages of the author's life. Saliba ends her story by recounting an adulthood dream in which her sittee appears to guide her down "alleyways of the bazaar, past tables

with jewelry, perfume, and ceramics” (Saliba 17). Even after her grandmother has died, and Saliba has aged, in other words, the myth that links sittee with the exotic homeland lives on.

The spirit that pervades Saliba’s writing is carried on when, in L. J. Mahoul’s recollections, the sittee figure is made to stand for Arab history in its entirety. By inserting the generation of her parents into her memoir, Mahoul creates an autobiographical account that parallels the history of Arab-American writing in several ways. As a second-generation Arab-American, Mahoul depicts her interest in the family’s Middle Eastern heritage as one that is impeded by her parent’s generation who, like the first influx of Arab immigrants discussed previously, curtail the influence of the homeland, or some aspects of it, in this case, for the sake of assimilation. Describing her family as separating their Lebanese identity from Arab ethnicity entirely, harboring “vicious anti-Arab sentiment” (Mahoul 25) and as reacting to pronouncements of the family’s Arab roots with “aghast” expressions, Mahoul builds a narrative in which her construction of an imagined community becomes necessary in order to save the family’s Arab heritage from extinction. Predictably, and as demonstrated when Mahoul refers to the effort to learn about her Arab roots as salvaging her grandmother’s history, the sittee figure becomes an inextricable part of this process.

By couching her mission as one that “salvage[s]” (Mahoul 24) and as one that attempts to break through to the grandmother’s “submerged history” (Mahoul 25), Mahoul demonstrates a tendency, like the one put forth in Kadi’s introduction, that sees both sittees and the histories they represent as requiring the intervention of the younger generation in order to be saved. In part, Mahoul insinuates this by depicting her

grandmother as the archetypical victim of sex discrimination. Forced into marriage at the age of fourteen, Mahoul's sittee is exploited by her husband and children alike, who guarantee their control over her money by, among other things, never teaching her how to issue checks. Illiterate in the language of finance as she is in English, Mahoul's sittee is literally 'saved' when her grandchildren take it upon themselves to teach her how to write both checks and her children's names in English. This salvation is extended, on a symbolic level, when Mahoul becomes the only member of the family interested in hearing her sittee's stories. In doing so, Mahoul constructs a curious, alternative homeland. Although her attempt to trace back her Arab roots is intended to oppose the racist ideology of her parents, it is difficult to determine how this history is meant to be effective in light of its exclusive association with one person. Not only does Mahoul's sittee become the "timeless entity" (Mahoul 27) of Arab history—hardly a recognition of the grandmother's ordinary humanity—but this history becomes one that is intimately tied to stereotypical notions of gender relations and the treatment of women—hardly a recognition of the strong sittees who are meant to inspire the work.

The placement of Mahoul and Saliba's narratives, in relation to Kadi's introduction and the remainder of the anthology, becomes equally as important as the content of their work in examining their use of grandmother figures. Although Kadi maintains that the spirit of strong sittees inspires the entire text, the reality is that only the first section of the anthology discusses grandmothers directly, and that the narratives of Mahoul and Saliba are one of the very few to do so extensively in the section. Titled "Our Roots Go Deep: Where We Come From", the section may thus be seen as fulfilling the requirements of inserting cultural markers that Salaita identifies in his argument. Because

a similar anthology about feminism could very well have been written without the first section,⁶ the fact that the section is not only included but stressed by Kadi as the unifying force behind the work is one that must be questioned. By constructing such simplistic juxtapositions as the ones I have outlined above, it is a question worth asking whether the contributors of the anthology are more interested in using their grandmothers to establish their work as having a unique vantage point than in a sustained effort to connect these grandmothers to the topics at hand. In other words, are sittees used to prove that the work is uniquely ‘Arab’ and that anthology is not ‘just’ another one about feminism? Or do the grandmother figures in the text truly provide a basis against which to construct an argument about being a double minority author in the United States?

The Imagined and the Anxious: Sittee Speaks in *The Night Counter*

Alia Yunis’s *The Night Counter* centers on the character of Fatima Abdullah, an eighty-five year old Lebanese immigrant brought to Los Angeles by way of Detroit. In pursuing her story, the novel utilizes a framework of magical realism that drifts between supernatural visitations and everyday issues of assimilation. Believing she has only one thousand and one nights to live, Fatima is visited by Scheherazade, immortal and visible only to the novel’s protagonist, on the eve of 9/11. In a reversal I argue has particular implications for the reinterpretation of sittee figures, Yunis depicts Scheherazade as the listener and audience who must convince Fatima, throughout the course of the novel, to narrate as much of her life as possible before its perceived end one thousand and one nights later. As Fatima struggles to tell the stories of her children, Scheherazade visits the places in which these children and grandchildren reside, interrupting Fatima’s narrative

⁶ The sections that follow abandon the grandmother figure almost entirely and focus, instead, on the contributors’ navigation of racism and sexism

and expanding its scope to a number of states (Michigan, Texas), cities (Las Vegas, Los Angeles) and countries (Lebanon, and Palestine). The result is a picaresque-like novel in which Fatima is both the central character and the only one capable of combining the distinct storylines into a narrative whole.

In the construction of *The Night Counter*, Yunis differs from the contributors of *Food For Our Grandmothers* most dramatically in juxtaposing Fatima's narrative (the 'real' sittee) against the manner in which Fatima is perceived by her family (the 'imagined' sittee). This is particularly true given the fact that Fatima's stories are heard only by the supernatural Scheherazade and ignored entirely by the 'real' people of her family. Much like the discussion of sittees in *Food For Our Grandmothers*, Fatima's family appears completely unable to separate the protagonist from the idea of the homeland, a position which limits Fatima's agency to her ability to remind family members of their ethnic origin and the values inscribed therein. When reminiscing about his ex-wife, Fatima's husband demonstrates this tendency, and mirrors Saliba's comment that her grandmother "is Lebanon", when he states that "when your mama talked, [when] she laughed...she brought Lebanon back to me" (Yunis 99). The association is one that reinforces the collapse between the homeland and the (grand)mother figure by making elements of Fatima's physicality—her laugh; her speech—responsible for the depiction of an entire nation, an idea that is then reinforced in the way she is perceived by her children. As Scheherazade visits the locations of various members of Fatima's family, the same photograph of the protagonist, taken of her on her wedding day, appears in each of the children's homes and workplaces. In a majority of these instances, the photograph's presence is necessitated because of the stability it is imagined to represent in the face of

difficult circumstances or, more cynically, as a reminder of traditional values that are juxtaposed against the younger generation's rebellion. In one such case, Fatima's picture is placed at a bar where her son is struggling to maintain his sobriety. Explaining that the son thus places the photograph to fulfill a promise to his father to "honor his mother even if he couldn't respect his father" (Yunis 308), Yunis depicts the son as connecting Fatima's picture to the discipline imposed on him in his adolescence (even, ironically, when this discipline is enforced by an entirely different figure), as well as with a judgmental presence that he must turn away from if "he wanted to stay sober" (Yunis 308). Likewise, when the photograph appears before one of Fatima's daughters finds out that her illegitimate teenage granddaughter is pregnant, it serves to contrast the perceived repression of Fatima's body with the boundaries that the granddaughter crosses in her actions. In both of these cases, Fatima's photograph becomes, like food, the tangible connection through which the younger generation constructs an imagined homeland/community. At best, this community is one built on Bardenstein's notions of false stability and, at worst, it is one that follows the model of *Food For Our Grandmothers* in being a mere conservative contrast to the Arab American lifestyle.

What distinguishes this text from the one discussed previously, however, and what complicates the family's imposition of a certain narrative onto Fatima's life is Yunis's consistent association of the protagonist with a code switching that enables her to occupy *both* the spheres of 'Arab' and 'Arab American' throughout the novel. In the scenes that represent Fatima as involved in domestic behavior reminiscent of imagined-sittee territory, this becomes visible in Yunis's deliberate insertion of American pop culture. Far from being the sittee associated with "bazaar and bizarre" (Saliba 9), Fatima

makes *kibbe* in front of baseball games, “waves [her grandson] and his ignorance of sports away” (Yunis, 205), and dances *dabke* to Frank Sinatra. Undoubtedly a case of tongue-in-cheek storytelling on Yunis’s part, the mixing of Middle Eastern and American cultural references is also pivotal in undermining the imagined juxtaposition upon which the narrative of *Food For Our Grandmothers* is predicated. Indeed, if Yunis has her sittee with a foot in each culture, she subverts the myth further when she represents Fatima as critical of the way her American neighbor is treated. Exclaiming that when she first came to the US, she “couldn’t understand how the women...let men boss them around” (Yunis 121), Fatima emerges as the Arab feminist who is concerned about the agency of a victimized white woman. Not only does this incident subvert the attempts by the contributors of *Food For Our Grandmothers* to save their kitchen-ridden sittees, it is one that deconstructs any exclusive association of this type of feminism with the influence of America.

As Yunis situates her sittee narrative outside the simplistic juxtaposition of homeland/America, many of her subversions rely on the depictions of Fatima’s body. Although it is never explicitly stated in either *Food For Our Grandmothers* or *The Night Counter*, Yuni’s tactic becomes particularly important because of both works’ suggestion that the imagined sittee is one who is expected to be traditionally (and asexually) feminine. Unlike the body of Saliba’s grandmother, however, which is situated both in the domestic sphere and in the maintenance of youth-centric femininity, and unlike the expectations of her own family, Fatima’s body offers a significantly different interpretation of the aging process and the performance of gender. While Saliba’s sittee is described as “disguis[ing] her age as best she could,” “dying her hair rusty red,” and

“painting her lips with ruby gloss” (Kadi 9), Fatima is depicted as taking pride in the fact that she “could make her frailties...come and go as needed” (Yunis 3). Referring to the protagonist’s tendency to control these “frailties” by choosing to use or abandon her hearing aid and eye-glasses, the description positions Fatima as occupying the opposing end of the spectrum as Saliba’s grandmother where their reactions to societal desexualization are concerned. While both women’s bodies are similarly devalued by a patriarchal system interested only in young women’s beauty, the decision by Saliba’s grandmother to “disguise her age” runs contrary to Fatima’s decision to join or reject the societal system—the same one which imposes the narratives of the imagined community—as she pleases.

Indeed, if Fatima’s abandonment of her hearing aid and glasses represent her rejection of the societal system, it is her decision to cut off her hair that represents, conversely, the most dramatic of her rejections *by* the very same system she wishes to escape. Unlike Saliba’s grandmother, who gratifies the social order by dyeing her hair, Fatima’s removal of her hair represents the most dramatic departure from narratives of traditional femininity in the text. Most ironic about this departure is the fact that it is couched, at least initially, in Fatima’s desire to be a good mother. Believing she is soon to die, Fatima decides to bequeath her hair to a daughter suffering from cancer, a choice we must assume is partly inspired by the fact that her hair’s beauty “was one of the family’s few givens.” (Yunis 133), and one she uses to convince Scheherazade to cut her hair down to stubs. The maternal intentions behind her haircut notwithstanding, Fatima’s decision to cut off her hair is met by shock both on the part of Scheherazade, who exclaims that “a woman’s hair is her proof of wealth and happiness...it is her crown”

(Yunis 123), and by members of Fatima's family whose own viewpoints depart very little from the immortal storyteller's traditional notions about femininity. While one grandson describes Fatima's shorn hair as "a disaster", his mother dismisses the news of the haircut entirely, claiming it is as likely as her "[buying] nuclear weapons stock" (Yunis 128), and being described later as finding laughter "impossible" with "the image of her mother's stubs...in her cluttered mind" (Yunis 131). In reacting to the news of the haircut, Fatima's family interprets the act as a moment of complete psychological collapse. While overhearing Fatima talking to herself (to Scheherazade) leads one grandson to repeatedly warn the family about the protagonist's mental health, it is only when Fatima's children hear of the matriarch's haircut that they take heed of the warning, flying in to take care of her, and claiming that their mother "has to be the dying kind of crazy to cut off her hair" (Yunis 343).

The reaction of Fatima's family to the most visible of her transgressions against imagined-sittee norms is one that offers a glimpse of what is at stake in the collapse of the imagined narrative. While Fatima's family may wish to read the haircut as proof of their grandmother's insanity, the reality is that the act is much more indicative of their anxiety about the collapse of the narrative than it is reflective of Fatima's state of mind. By cutting off her hair, in other words, Fatima severs an integral part of her connection to the sittee that her family has constructed. It is little wonder, then, that laughter becomes "impossible". Indeed, the fact that Fatima's haircut becomes the impetus that gathers her family in the same place for the first and only time in the novel is proof of the family's need to salvage as much of the imagined community as possible after the (grand)mother's transgressions. Spending the majority of the novel shirking Fatima's requests to see them,

and treating the protagonist with a “silence that was supposed to be comforting” (Yunis 351), Fatima’s children flock to where she lives—the ‘homeland’—in the final few scenes of the novel and in the only chapter which Yunis titles after the family name.⁷

The need of Fatima’s family to ascertain the continuation of the homeland narrative is one that is mirrored in the protagonist’s own conflicted feelings about her role in society. Beginning the stories she tells Scheherazade by couching her marital relationships in terms of duty, and with an attitude that deemed discussions of sex akin to the behavior of “a common street girl” (Yunis 30), Fatima is gradually able to admit that she felt “more than gratitude” for her ex-husband, and that she “had begun loving him a long, long time ago” (Yunis 361). This change is one that likewise accompanies Fatima’s transforming relationships with those around her. While she spends the majority of the novel in denial about her favorite grandson’s sexuality, putting together plans to marry him and arranging blind dates with women, Fatima’s acceptance of the grandson’s homosexuality is verbalized in one of the final scenes of the novel when she uses the word “gay” for the first time, an occurrence that coincides with her acceptance of one daughter’s relationship with a Jewish-American man. As the daughter attempts to uphold the juxtapositional narrative, promising to “never never marry someone Jewish, as long as [Fatima] live[s]” (Yunis 355), Fatima collapses the distinction between the conservative and the liberal when she gives her blessing to the union and asks her daughter, in a turning of the tables, to “stop making [her] tired.” Situating these occurrences in the home/homeland of Fatima, Yunis’s novel ends on a tenuous note: although Fatima extends her approval, it is one tainted with both her own anxiety (the

⁷ After a series of chapters titled according to the character they depict—Fatima, Scheherazade, or one of the protagonist’s children/grandchildren—the chapter in which the children arrive is titled in the plural: “The Abdullahs.”

protagonist wonders “what has become of [her] world” – Yunis 353) and with that of the people to whom she extends this approval (her use of the word gay “shocked her children nearly as much as her...stubs had”). Given this anxiety, the fate of the imagined community can, perhaps, only be described as hanging in the balance at the end of *The Night Counter*. One must not forget, after all, that Yunis’s sittee may speak—but only in the words with which she provides her.

Conclusion

Despite the tentativeness with which Yunis ends her novel, Fatima’s exploration of new roles ushers in a different way to think about sittees in Arab American literature. While grandmothers are spoken for in *Food For Our Grandmothers* much like they are spoken for in the works of Jarrar, Noble, and Kahf, *The Night Counter* allows a grandmother to speak for the first time in the community’s oeuvre. Represented, as she is, by a young author, this act of speaking is not without its problems, yet it is one that helps destabilize notions of traditionalism and domesticity that many Arab American writers have associated with sittees in their narratives. In light of Majaj’s comment about the community’s desire to forge connections across ethnic lines, this destabilization becomes necessary in order to guarantee that no Arab American, to borrow from the language of politics, is left behind. Writing in the 1990s, Majaj’s comment becomes all the more crucial in a post-9/11 examination of Arab American literature. Much more visible today than at the time of Majaj’s writing, the Arab American community cannot, given its marginalization by much of mainstream America, afford to construct internal stereotypes of its own people. If the imagined community of Arab America and its literature is to be effective in combating discrimination and pushing for inclusion in the American publishing market, it is time that its writers allow sittee to leave the kitchen.

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This report was typed by the author.