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The Politics of Food and Memory in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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By

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To my mother, Maria das Graças Ferreira, my source of inspiration and strength: the needle of my compass. Your unconditional love makes all the difference in my life.

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the fictional representation of food and memory in the novel *Crescent* (2003) by Jordanian-American Diana Abu-Jaber. The novel presents a rich depiction of food intertwined with memory and provides the ground for the discussion of ethnicity and political issues. In general, I argue that the restaurant chef Sirine and her food work as an ethnic bonding agent drawing different ethnicities of Arabs and non-Arabs together in the space of Nadia's Café, the locus where a heterogeneous diasporic community comes into existence. The café has a strong role to play as it is the space where characters make revelations concerning their fears and their past experiences, thus, it becomes a powerful *site of memory* to use Pierre Nora's term. In addition, I discuss the significance of photographs and other objects, especially a scarf – as they too operate a kind of return to the past, making early experiences surface in the present and therefore constituting as well a site of memory.

RESUMO

Este estudo discute a representação ficcional da comida e da memória no romance *Crescent* (2003) da escritora Estadunidense, de origem Jordaniana, Diana Abu-Jaber. O romance apresenta uma rica descrição da comida diretamente ligada à memória oferecendo o terreno para discussão da etnicidade e de assuntos políticos. No geral, argumento que Sirine e a comida feita por ela funcionam como um agente de ligação entre as diferentes etnicidades de árabes e não-árabes no espaço do Nadia's Café, lugar de onde uma heterogênea comunidade diaspórica vem existir. O café exerce um papel importante por ser o espaço em que personagens fazem revelações a cerca de seus medos e de suas experiências passadas, constituindo, dessa maneira, um *lugar de memória*, conforme proposto por Pierre Nora. Além disso, discuto a importância das fotografias e de outros objetos – especialmente um lenço – por também operarem um retorno ao passado, fazendo experiências passadas virem à tona no presente, constituindo-se também como lugares de memória.

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The Arab diaspora in the United States encompasses a large number of immigrants that left their countries for different reasons. Their motivations range from the search for better a life to being forced to abandon their home countries as refugees. In any case, it is worth investigating how they interact with the social contexts of their host countries. Although this is often overlooked, it is a fact that these immigrants of Arab background are responsible for somehow changing the social contexts of many countries, and this is especially so in the United States, where it is estimated that there are over 3,5 million people of Arab ancestry all over the country. Among the different groups of Arab ancestry, in the U.S., the Lebanese, the Syrians and the Palestinians are the largest and the most prominent groups.

The first wave of immigrants to go to the United States is dated late in the nineteenth century, more precisely from 1861 to 1914, just before the World War I, and their initial occupations were primarily as peddlers of dry goods to the different ethnic groups who were also beginning to settle in the country. In the book *Arab-American Faces and Voices*, Elizabeth Boosahda observes that, "generally, they maintained their Arab culture through food and its presentation, the Arabic language, religion (Christianity and Islam), dance, music, literature, philosophy, poetry and storytelling" (xii). Besides that, the first immigrants "had a strong drive to be independent entrepreneurs" (11).

After the civil war and the opening of the West, the United States faced a strong necessity of skilled labor force to work in the industry and other developing areas. Because of that, "American agents were sent to villages in order to persuade cheap labor forces with promises of wealth and independence" (Boosahda 7). As Boosahda remarks, the first immigrants came "for adventure and wealth, and after a few years some returned to their homelands financially better off" (7). The desire of returning was nurtured by most immigrants of the first wave of migration.

According to Palestinian critic Lisa Majaj, in the article "Arab-American Literature: Origins and Development," the cultural context faced by the first immigrants was "heavily assimilationist" (par 2). As she explains, "the question of how to respond to such pressures while also maintaining an Arab identity was a matter of great importance to the early immigrant community: newspapers and journals published debates about how to preserve Arab identity in the American-born generation, even as they discussed practical matters of integration" (par 2).

The second wave of migration began after World War I. Unlike the first wave which was made up of Christians, the new group was basically made up of Muslims.

As Tanyss Ludescher ponders,

> [t]he second wave of immigrants consisted of educated, skilled professionals, who were more likely to be familiar with the nationalist ideologies that permeated the Arab world. Unlike the Syrian Christians, they staunchly identified themselves as Arabs. Included in this group were a number of Palestinian refugees who had been rendered stateless as a result of the catastrophic 1948 Arab-Israeli War. (94)

Adding to that, during World War I, the contact with their homelands became more difficult and the strict laws of immigration "in the 1920s increased the community's sense of isolation and encouraged a feeling of communal unity and solidarity, which had began during the war" (Ludescher 98).

The third wave is dated from 1967 to the present day, when new arrivals found a more hostile environment due to recent political events involving Arabic speaking countries and the United States. Ludescher remarks that the end of the quota system in 1965 conjugated with political conflicts in the region such as the Israeli occupation in Palestine and the Lebanese civil war produced a great wave of immigrants that entered the country as political refugees. As the critic comments,

> Imbued with anti-colonial sentiment and Arab nationalist ideas, this new group was highly politicized. For the first time, Arab American organizations were formed to defend the Arab point view and to combat negative stereotypes of Arab in the popular press. Newly sensitized to their ethnic identity by worldwide political events, the descendants of first- and second-wave

> immigrants joined their newly arrived countrymen in support of Arab concerns. (94)

In the article "Arab-Americans in the Political Process," Michael W. Suleiman highlights some points concerning the process of immigration of Arabs to America. Suleiman ponders that there are differences between each generation because of the different backgrounds of each. Adding to that, new arrivals – 3rd and 4th generations – see themselves as an ethnic community, being aware of their political and ambiguous social status within the racial system of the United States.

Despite representing a significant portion of the immigrant groups in the United States, the conspicuous presence of Arab peoples has not always led to an unbiased view of the group. Quite the contrary, Arab descendants have often been the target of negative stereotypes and discrimination, especially after September 11 attacks, when the media attention upon them increased enormously and governmental forces were articulated to prevent the country from any other terrorist attack. The fact is that, perhaps due to a lack of cultural awareness or what one could call "ethnic sensitivity", there is a strong tendency toward the homogenization of immigrants and their descendents in the U.S., including those of Arab origin.

Lisa Majaj, in the article "Arab American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations," borrows the phrase "politics of recognition" in order to elicit public affirmation of Arabs in the United States. According to her, group affirmation would be of great importance for Arab Americans

> who have been historically rendered invisible in the context by their relatively small numbers, by their ambiguous location within American racial and ethnic categories, and by their

> tenuous status within American political and cultural contexts. (320-21)

Indeed, as the critic continues, Arab Americans are invariably "[e]xcluded from American citizenship at various times on the basis of being 'Asian' or 'non-white,' [regardless of the fact that they are] currently officially classified as white" (Majaj 321).

Being classified as "white," in the eyes of the government, does not grant Arab Americans inclusion in the American society. This classification as white –"honorary whites," that is, as Majaj ironically remarks using a concept from Joseph Massad and Soheir Morsy, does not save Arab Americans from situations of racism and discrimination. The current classification elicits the lack of consciousness of the American government since there is a discrepancy in the classification criteria to solve a question that is more concerned with race rather than ethnicity.

By definition, according to the "Dictionary of Ethnic and Racial Relations," the term race, as a classification, refers to "a group or category of people connected by a common origin" (Cashmore 447, my translation). This concept is hugely used in order to justify the submission of people taking physical differences into consideration. Skin color becomes the major element to define one as belonging to a certain group. Furthermore, this concept, based exclusively on the phenotype, is misemployed and it is questioned by some scholars since it is a "mutable signifier that signifies different things to different people, in different moments in history and challenges the defined explanations outside specific contexts" (Cashmore 451). Also, the problem in defining the term race lies in the very fact that it "tries to describe something, but ends up including simultaneously the diversity" (452).

The term ethnicity, on the other hand, is a cultural phenomenon that refers to people or nation. Thus, it is used to describe a group that carries "a certain degree of

coherence and solidarity; it is composed by people who are conscious, at least in a latent form, of having origins and common interests" (Cashmore 196). Indeed, it is "the conscious aggregation of people united or proximately related by shared experience . . . they can be deprived of their culture, neutralized in the politic sphere and, frequently, everything mentioned" (Cashmore 196-97). The latter definition clearly situates the Arab American community in the U.S., for the history of Arabs in the country is marked by deprivation of rights and prejudice.

Moreover, the recent events involving the terrorist attacks to the World Trade Center portrays better this fact since they turned the world's attention to the presence of Arabs in the United States. As a result, the misperception of Arabs as terrorists is perpetuated. It does not really matter whether they are innocent or not, Arab Americans now face a new wave of prejudice against their culture.

September 11 did put Arabs in the spotlight in an unfavorable manner; Majaj points out yet other historical moments when negative responses toward these peoples were noticed in the United States. The author also lists documents that reveal the intolerance and racism faced by Arab Americans. They evidence that the "honorary whiteness" simply serves to put Arabs in a situation of "temporary" ethnic superiority in relation to other groups, such as the blacks, but, in reality their situation is even more delicate than that of other minorities in the U.S.

Majaj claims that a study carried out in 1981 revealed that "the term 'Arab' elicited more hostility than individual Arab identities such as Lebanese, Egyptian, Saudi, or Palestinian" (321). As a way of denying such negative stereotypes and asserting the various ethnic backgrounds, Arab Americans celebrate their culture in different ways such as publishing journals, as well as organizing art events and debates that concern their in-betweeness.

The debates often point to the clash between those who favor being accepted as whites, on the one hand, and those who wish to be recognized as people of color, on the other. Also, the debates emphasize, according to Majaj, "[the] tension between inclusion and exclusion that results hinders efforts to organize Arab Americans on a national level and complicates efforts at coalition building between Arab Americans and other ethnic and racial groups" (322). Regarding this particular ethnic group, Mojadid Daoud observed that, "[u]nlike other ethnic groups…Arab Americans have had to suffer directly as well as indirectly the effects of an ideology, namely Zionism, intended to defame the character of all Arabs" (173).

An attempt to break with such misperceptions regarding the peoples of Arab descent informs many works by Arab American writers. These works generally function as counter-voices insofar as they portray the Arab presence in the United States from the inside, and thus construct an utterly different view of the Arab peoples.

In an overview of Arab-American literature in the United States from its beginning to the present, Elmaz Abinader, in the article "Children of Al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century," observed that "Arab Americans were among the first immigrant writers to organize and to be recognized as a literary force by the broad U.S. literary community" (11).

In fact, a 1920s Arab American Literary League, centered in New York, known as the "Al-Mahjar," played a decisive role in shaping the present-day Arab-American literary production. The Mahjar group also set in the South America, especially in Brazil, however, as Ludescher observes, the group "was more conservative than its northern counterpart and produced few innovations that would challenge the prevailing neo-classical tradition of poetry in the Arab world" (95).

The works of the league members, mostly written in Arabic, focused on the immigrant condition and experiences of Arabs in the U.S. and made it available not only within the Arab community but also for a wider reading public throughout the country, when written in English .The most prominent figures were: Ameen Rihani, Khalil Gibran, and Mikhail Naimy who produced a great number of works in English. Their poetry also focused on the subjective experience, on Eastern religion, and on mysticism (Ludescher 96). Adding to that, they found a favorable atmosphere for experimentation, different from the strict tradition in the Arab world.

The labor of "literary diplomacy," so to speak, begun by the first immigrants, continues to be carried out by many writers of the second and third generations of Arab descendents. It is their responsibility to maintain the celebration of their culture of origin and, at the same time, to eradicate the mistaken homogeneity and "sameness" that is found in the way Americans perceive Arabs. One of the acclaimed authors of this new generation of Arab-American writers is Diana Abu-Jaber.

Born in upstate New York, Abu-Jaber spent different periods in her life going back and forth between Jordan, her father's homeland, and the United States, her mother's homeland. Her career as a writing professor at Portland University as well as her hyphenated condition allowed her to extensively elaborate on her "in-betweeness." Being a part of two different cultural traditions – Arab (more specifically Jordanian) and American – has become a sort of well from which she draws material for her writings, which Abu-Jaber herself considers "wonderfully healing." Her bibliography includes works of fiction such as *Arabian Jazz* (1993), *Crescent* (2003), *Origin* (2007) and a cookbook-memoir: *The Language of Baklava* (2005). Her novels represent the Arab-American existence from the point of view of someone who is deeply engaged in it and

who sways between both sides of the "cultural hyphen". They present themes that consciously mirror issues of ethnicity and immigrant condition.

In her second novel entitled *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber questions issues of identities, longing for home, self-discovery, and cultural transmission. The narrative structure is interwoven with flashbacks where memory and food are strongly connected. Besides that, food – the Middle Eastern food – appears as an essential indicator of the Arab American ethnicity.

Crescent is a novel about a thirty-nine-year-old woman, Sirine, who is Iraqi-American and works as a chef at Nadia's Café, a Lebanese restaurant, in Los Angeles. Sirine is single and falls in love with an Iraqi exile named Hanif Al Eyad, a literature professor. Despite being a hyphenated person, Sirine does not speak Arabic, the language of her father, and she also does not actively engage in her family's religion. The legacy of her parents – especially from her father – are the old recipes of Arab dishes. When Sirine started working at the café, she began cooking "the favorite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories" (Abu-Jaber 19). It is through the medium of food that Sirine negotiates her Arab self.

Hanif or Han, as he is called throughout the novel, carries the pain of being an exile. In a certain way, he tries to place himself inside the new environment of the U.S. and, little by little, he reveals details of his life. The novel is interwoven with Hanif's flashbacks of his life in Iraq and his escape from the country during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Moreover, *Crescent* goes beyond a love story and mixes fantasy and reality through the narrative of Sirine's uncle who tells the tale of the slave Abdelrahman Salahadin and his mother Camille.

As I started reading *Crescent*, the rich depiction of food intertwined with flashbacks really called my attention. Besides that, food in literature is a theme in which I have particular interest as it grounds the discussion of political and social issues. Moreover, it is not only the use of the Arab food, but also the way the characters deal with memories of early experiences that instigated me to go in deeper in my reading so as to understand the interconnection between food and memory and its implications. It is my main contention that Sirine and her food work as an ethnic bonding agent drawing different ethnicities of Arabs and non-Arabs together in the space of Nadia's Café, which becomes the locus where a heterogeneous diasporic community comes into existence. To support my contention, I rely on Carol Fadda-Conrey's article devoted to the interethnic relationships and the role of Sirine and her food as ethnic bonding agents in *Crescent*. Moreover, in my view, food in the novel also provides the ground for the discussion of issues of politics and displacement.

In Chapter I, entitled **"**Food for Thought: Politics of Food and Eating in *Crescent*," I explore the representation of food, both in social and literary studies. To discuss the social importance of food, I rely on articles and books devoted to the very aspect of food as an essential element in social life. I consider works of sociologists such as Ariovaldo Franco, Michel De Certeau, Linda Civitello, Carol Bardenstein, and Claude Fischler. These works provide a rich analysis of the social relevance of food for the collective aspects of human existence. Adding to that, Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du. Bois' article also served as a starting point for me to understand the main intricacies of food as being of great importance for the individual's sense of self and identity.

My discussion of food in literature is based on three articles devoted to its representation in different literary contexts. Bardenstein's, Parker's and Menozzi's

articles were considered in this thesis because of their attempt to provide a discussion that goes beyond the general notion of food as "just a dish to be served" and explored how this element is strongly related to power, gender, memory and displacement. They offered me hints to uncover the different layers of meanings with which food is invested in Abu-Jaber's novel.

Food constitutes a strong element to define the Arab-American identity. Because of that, I also rely on Priscilla Wathington's study on contemporary Arab-American writings on food which elucidated some aspects of food in distinct literary works produced by this ethnic group. Her study divides the use of food as a literary device by Arab-American writers into two main categories, namely old world food literature and new work food literature, which I will discuss later. It shed some light for my better understanding of *Crescent*, besides helping me to situate Abu-Jaber within this literary tradition.

Moreover, as my reading went on, I realized a strong connection between food and storytelling. To discuss this issue, I rely on Gail De Vos's *Telling Tales: Storytelling in the Family* where the author wisely claims that food is a great catalyst for stories. This view is relevant for this research since it echoes Sirine's behavior as she often offers her uncle food when he is to start his tale. Food seems to instigate the uncle to fabricate his tale with more details.

In Chapter II, entitled "Remembering Homes: Politics of Memory," I explore the different politics of memory in Abu-Jaber's novel. Because of that, I see the necessity of first providing an overview of some theories of memory in social studies. In this way, I rely basically on Maurice Halbwachs' propositions to clarify some doubts regarding the individual and collective aspects of memory. In his renowned work *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs acknowledges that memory is as a social phenomenon since we

can only recall what constitutes part of our experience if it is shared by a group. He states that memory is the reconstruction of the past with the support of objects and data borrowed from the present. It is not surprising; therefore, that an immigrant community is the ideal collective 'environment' for the development of memory, and, more often than not, the collectivity expresses the predicament of being invisible inside the host culture.

Salman Rushdie's personal assessment and discussion of the significance of memory for himself and for other diasporic writers are relevant since they seem to warrant the point I have just mentioned. Besides that, I also rely on Jan Assmann, Paul Connerton and Sidonie Smith to discuss the relevance of the collective environment to the individual memory.

Also in this chapter, I discuss the complex relationship of the immigrant characters with Nadia's Café. I argue that the café is a sort of re-creation of home for those immigrants caught in an alien culture; thus, it also becomes the locus of a kind of mnemonic ritual for them. In this perspective, Nadia's Café has a strong role to play as it is the space where characters make revelations concerning their fears and their past experiences, thus, it becomes a powerful *site of memory* (or place of memory), borrowing Pierre Nora's term. Adding to that, in my view, the café undergoes a kind of gradation: from a public sphere to a more intimate one – in both spheres meaningful revelations are made.

Elizabeth Boosahda's remarks on the role of the cafés in the beginning of the development of the Arab American community served as a starting point for my research, and so did also Fadda-Conrey's article. As Boosahda remarks, the coffee houses served as networking centers for the immigrants to talk about "current issues"

and enjoy companionship (72), and a similar environment is fictionally created in *Crescent*.

Moreover, as I started this research, I realized that the characters Sirine, Hanif and the American photographer Nathan respond differently to their flashbacks, and their memories depend upon different prosthetic devices such as photographs and a scarf to surface. Because of that, I also analyze these objects under the light of Nora's definition. Besides that, I discuss some theories of photography and I based my analysis on Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* and *Sobre Fotografia*. In these books, Sontag provides an overview of photography and expands her discussion on the use of photos as being outlaw and invasive. Sontag's ideas echo some passages in Abu-Jaber's novels as the characters respond differently to the photos presented to them and even question their use.

Through this research, I hope to contribute to the development of a critical view of the field Arab American literary studies not only within the U.S. context, but also here in Brazil, which also has a large population of Arab background. This investigation may be of use for future studies on works by Arab-Brazilian writers. I believe that by offering a closer investigation of the literary production of this ethnic group, stereotypes usually employed to refer to them may be broken and a critical view towards the condition of this ethnic group in the U.S. can take effect.

1. Food for Thought: Politics of Food and Eating in *Crescent.*

> *Identity – religious, national, ethnic – is intensely bound up with food. Every group thinks of itself as special and exceptional and uses food to show it.*
> *Linda Civitello (xvi)*

> *Baklava is her specialty . . . When I inhale Auntie Aya's baklava, I press my hand to my sternum, as if I am smelling something too dear for this world. The scent contains the mysteries of time, loss, and grief, as well as promises of journeys and rebirth. I pick up a piece and taste it. I eat and eat. The baklava is so good, it gives me a new way of tasting Arabic food. It is like a poem about deeply bred luxuries of Eastern cultures.*
> *Diana Abu-Jaber (The Language of Baklava 191)*

Diana Abu-Jaber often uses food as a literary device and a significant theme in her writings. The presence of food and the act of eating in her books – specially in the novel *Crescent* and in the memoir *The Language of Baklava* – are used as an important and meaningful symbols since they often function as a compass in the new space – in the United States – establishing as well a bridge between the place of origin and the new setting as the Arab immigrants present in her novels deal with different kinds of displacement, mainly the geographical one. Abu-Jaber herself defined the "metaphor" of food as "such a great human connector," and something "intimate" (5). She keeps on arguing that it is "the most powerful way of creating the metaphor of the heart and gathering place, a place where the collective forms" (5).

In the article "Counter narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom observe that food, in both Nye's poetry and Abu-Jaber's novel, structures the narratives and "functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and

exile" (33-34). They insist that food has a sacred meaning insofar as it works as a "natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions;" moreover, as the authors observe, Nye and Abu-Jaber "use food to construct spaces wherein they imagine the possibilities of peace, love and community" (33-34).

This approach to Abu-Jaber's representation of food in *Crescent* calls attention to the necessity of examining, first of all, the possible meanings and uses of food, both in social and literary studies. In general, I argue that food in *Crescent* works as an ethnic bonding agent, bringing different ethnic characters together. It is my contention that Sirine, the main character of the novel, and the food she cooks function as a kind of bridge that is able to draw different ethnicities together and also to connect present and past as long as its flavor remain in the mouth. Besides that, food acquires different nuances throughout the novel, as it seems to instigate immigrant characters to question and make revelations of their fears and dreams towards their lives in the U.S. In this way, I argue that food is strongly connected to the issue of direction and orientation as Sirine, the chef, and Hanif, the professor, are bound to each other through the manipulation and savoring of the Arab food cooked by her.

The most relevant analysis of the uses of food in the novel that I discuss in this chapter is based on Carol Fadda-Conrey's assumptions in the article "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*." Indeed, I consider her view as the most appropriate for the objective of this chapter. Fadda-Conrey ponders that

> contemporary Arab American writers such as Abu-Jaber and others articulate stories about individual and group identities, locating strategies by which the ethnic borderland becomes a

> space of communication for different minority groups, a space that ultimately leads to the transformation of ethnic relations. . . Recognizing the differences among and within minority groups becomes an essential part of Abu-Jaber's delineation of the ties that unite them within *Crescent*'s ethnic borderland. (194)

I rely on her view of food as a connective medium that "transcends the limitations that the difference [of complex identities of the Café regulars] might engender" (202). Moreover, as she states, it is through food that "Sirine can enact her role as a bridge across the different ethnic communities" (199).

Being able to draw together peoples that may be enemies in the region they come from confers on her food the status of a cultural, as well as political bridge, creating bonds among them that are solidified when the feeling of loneliness that results from being inserted in a culture which is totally apart from theirs arises. Different cultures and backgrounds find themselves inside the same space and united by the same purpose of enjoying cultural emblems that may mitigate the painful feeling of being away from home.

As a starting point for this investigation, I see the necessity of posing some questions regarding the social importance of food. Why do we eat? What's the meaning of food? In a first glance, these may be considered rhetorical questions as some believe eating to be just part of everyday practices. To answer these questions we have to assume that we eat to satisfy the basic necessities of our body – an assumption that delineates the primary role of food. Eating, thus, becomes one of the few activities that approximate human beings to animals. Nevertheless, for the formers, the act of eating goes beyond a mere physiological necessity to become a ritual invested of symbolic

meanings. Carol Bardenstein, in her turn, expands on the social importance of food. She writes that

> a resurgence of scholarship on the relationship between food and the many aspects of human experience has taken up with renewed interest these roles of food in the social, religious, and cultural lives of people and the ways food consumption, preparation, and transmission of knowledge about food has figured in how *individuals conceive of themselves, affiliate and identify with home, homeland*, and a range of social groupings, and how the earliest and most persistently retained sense memories are profoundly incorporated into the creation and structuring of collective memory and cultural identity. (356, emphasis added)

Bardenstein's assumptions well illustrate the present situation of food studies since food has become an interesting topic of analysis both in social and literary studies as it constitutes a fundamental element to discuss cultural, economic, political, and ethnic issues. Eating habits carry symbolic meanings and are strongly connected to the way people see and place themselves inside a given group. Indeed, as Michel de Certeau writes, "[e]ating habits constitute a domain in which tradition and innovation have the same importance, in which present and past entwine to satisfy the necessity of the moment, to bring the joy of an instant and suit the circumstances" (212).[1]

In addition, food practice is a cultural activity and its meanings go beyond its everyday use. As Linda Civitello remarks, "[w]e give food meaning far beyond its survival function. It has been used in rituals to guarantee fertility, prosperity, a good

[1] "Os hábitos alimentares constituem um domínio em que tradição e a inovação têm a mesma importância, em que o presente e o passado se entrelaçam para satisfazer a necessidade do momento, trazer a alegria de um instante e convir às circunstâncias" (De Certeau 212).

marriage, and an afterlife. It has been used to display the power and wealth of the state, the church, corporations, a person" (xiii). The act of eating, too, provides a moment for people to exchange ideas, share feelings and expectations. As Brazilian sociologist Ariovaldo Franco remarks, a common meal can mark a new direction in the future of human relationships (22). In fact, mealtime also constitutes an opportunity for those involved in that ritual to exteriorize conflicts, and becomes a form of celebrating achievements and getting the family together, as Franco concludes (22-23).

Food and eating are great tools for reinforcing group membership as Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois claim in the article "The Anthropology of Food and Eating." According to them, food is "used in the creation and maintenance of social relationships, [since it] serves both to solidify group membership and to set groups apart" (109). Furthermore, food is also related to the construction of "nationhood, ethnicity and race" (109), as the authors ponder.

The critics discussed thus far share an emphasis on the collective aspect of food and eating. The French sociologist Claude Fischler, however, attempts to add a new dimension to this discussion: the individual significance of the act of eating. As he claims, food is a key element to the construction of selfhood and "is central to our sense of identity" (275).[2] In his article, he states that

> [t]he way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and otherness of whoever eats differently. *Food is also central to individual identity, in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and*

[2] I acknowledge the very danger of misusing the term identity; however, I am using it as proposed by Stuart Hall (2006). According to Hall, identity is a slippery term, in constant change due to the reconfiguration of the post-modern subject who does not have a fixed, essential, or permanent identity (12). Indeed, identity, as it is used in this thesis, refers to something not stable or defined; it is in constant change and transformation according to events or the materiality of everyday practices.

> *socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate*. (275, emphasis added)

Curiously enough, despite the fact that Fischler wishes to call attention to the individual significance of food, his own quotation betrays itself by the use of the adverb "socially". This is a relevant aspect for the discussion I propose here, since it is the insistence upon the collective nature of food and eating that will sustain my claim that the café in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* is able to draw a collectivity where it is not even quite expected: a collectivity, despite fictional, among otherwise separate ethnicities. This is not to say, though, that the private sphere should be entirely dismissed. As I will discuss later, a personal memory can be indeed arisen during the act of eating. Eating together promotes solidarity and strengthens bonds among individuals. Mealtime within the family domain, as an example, "is an appropriate ritual for the transmission of values. By means of learning the manners, especially the ones related to the table, the child has a picture of the contours of the world which she belongs and the attitudes adopted by her social group are assimilated as standard" (Franco 23, my translation),[3] as Franco remarks.

My own experience with food somehow echoes Franco's claims. I recall my mother cooking on Sundays, when there were no classes and all of her five children got together in the living room anxious to taste and savor that Sunday meal. For us, those meals were a family time – a time to sit at the table and experience that symbolic moment of pleasure by observing and listening to my parents talk and discuss family matters. My father would always bring a guest to share that moment of complicity with us. I could then feel the importance of a well prepared dish, cooked with love and tenderness in the precious times my mother spent in the kitchen. It meant an occasion of

[3] "é um ritual propício à transmissão de valores. Por meio da aprendizagem de maneiras, sobretudo das de mesa, desenham-se para a criança os contornos do mundo ao qual ela pertence e as atitudes aprovadas pelo seu grupo social são assimiladas como norma" (Franco 23).

joy and taught us some values of life – especially praising a good meal – and social codes involved when sitting at a table. From that time on, I learned how food is a powerful element in our lives as it touches both body and mind so deeply.

Food not only constitutes an essential element in social life, but it also has the power of making many memories surface in us, as long as we experience the tastes, smells, and the texture of the dish. Indeed, it touches our most primitive senses as it reaches our brain in a way that it recreates the smells, tastes, and feelings experienced back in time when we first savored a certain dish. Smells and tastes trigger past memories – the ones stored deeply in our minds. They also invoke pleasant or unpleasant feelings in the moment of eating. The smell of particular foods can make us revisit joyous moments – moments apparently forgotten – that come to the surface when we (re)experience our childhood dishes.

Some foods have the power to make us travel through the senses – and through time – to visualize those people we lost or with whom we have shared a special moment. Thus, as stated earlier, eating a pleasant food is also inspiring since it draws people together around the kitchen table for moments of sharing deepest feelings – feelings of love, passion, or even fear – besides providing a great moment for storytelling, as I discuss later in this chapter.

The ingredients used to prepare a certain recipe may take us back in time. In the particular case of immigrants, the memories invoked in this process can either soften the pain of a lost homeland as well as diminish the sense of displacement. Moreover, eating is one of the most powerful ways of reinforcing and negotiating identities. As De Certeau observes, “nowadays, things and people flow from one continent to the other, one can enjoy exotic cuisines, try out new flavors, strange combinations, unexpected recipes are prepared and the link of cause and effect between products available at a

good price and local cuisine does not exist anymore" (De Certeau 242, my translation).[4] Each country and peoples carry their own culinary particularities. This may be the reason why eating exotic foods – especially ethnic foods – nowadays has a high social status, becoming a synonym of sophistication. De Certeau also claims that, "the eating habits of a given society in a given time are connected by internal coherences, invisible, but real. Everything happens as if a given eating habit revealed an order of the world, or rather postulated in its very act the possible inscription of this order in the world" (De Certeau 245, my translation).[5]

Civitello, in her turn, calls our attention to the fact that "[t]here is no one food consumed by everyone on earth. Taste is determined by culture, anatomy, and genetics" since "[a]lmost everything we eat, and when, and where, is culturally determined, so taste is taught" (xvi). Franco, on the other hand, ponders that "the cooking habits of a nation do not result from a mere instinct of survival and from the necessity of eating. They are the expression of its history, geography, climate, social organization, and religious beliefs" (Franco 23, my translation).[6] That is, for each social group, food and its practices should reflect the cultural diversity and set each one's particularities.

Moreover, food also has a straight connection with the re-creation of home when away from it. Immigrants caught in the different cultural webs of a foreign country feel the necessity of leaning upon small fragments of the old home as a way of keeping alive the tradition of their ancestors and, consequently, claiming for themselves a form of

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[4] "Atualmente, coisas e pessoas se transportam de um continente a outro, pode-se saborear cozinhas exóticas, experimentar novos sabores, estranhas combinações, receitas inesperadas são feitas e o vínculo de causa entre produtos disponíveis a bom preço e cozinha comum local já não existe mais" (De Certeau 242).

[5] "os hábitos alimentares de uma determinada sociedade num dado tempo estão ligadas por coerências internas, invisíveis, mas reais. Tudo se passa como se um determinado regime alimentar revelasse um ordem do mundo, ou antes postulasse em seu próprio ato a inscrição possível desta ordem no mundo" (De Certeau 245).

[6] "Os hábitos culinários de uma nação não decorrem somente do mero instinto de sobrevivência e da necessidade do homem de se alimentar. São expressão de sua história, geografia, clima, organização social e crenças religiosas" (Franco 23).

belonging. Tasting and cooking the food from their homelands in a host country becomes a tool for recalling and reviving the memories of the homeland they left behind. However, as Fred L. Gardaphé and Wenying Xu write in the introduction of the special issue of the MELUS, in the U.S., a great effort has been made to homogenize and reform the immigrants' eating habits in order to transform them into potential capitalist consumers. The critics write that

> immigrant foodways have been traditionally perceived by mainstream culture as markers of ethnic inferiority . . . to reform the immigrant's foodways was not simply an effort to assimilate him or her into mainstream American culture; it was also an effort to turn him or her into a capitalist consumer, because culinary diversities in the 1940s resisted homogenizing, industrial food production (9).

Their comment regarding the specific time/frame of the 1940s still applies to the beginning of the twenty-first century, as my previous claim regarding the status of exotic foods proves. Indeed, as Franco writes, "[t]he eating habits have deep roots in the social identity of individuals. They are, therefore, the most persistent habits in the process of acculturation of immigrants" (Franco 24, my translation).[7] Smells and tastes of the dishes of the childhood are mentally fixed and become a connection between the memories of the mother's house and the meanings they carry. So, in this way, for immigrants, food becomes a bridge connecting the tastes of the present with the tastes back in their old homes. As a result, as Franco calls our attention, "the exaltation of some dishes of the mother's cuisine, or from the country of origin, even when they are

[7] "Os hábitos alimentares têm raízes profundas na identidade dos indivíduos. São, por isso, os hábitos mais persistentes no processo de aculturação dos imigrantes" (Franco 24).

mediocre, can last a life time and its savoring triggers, sometimes, surprising mental associations" (Franco 24, my translation).[8]

From now on, I will focus on the way food practices are performed in *Crescent*. Before that, in order to discuss the implications of food in literature, I will rely on three articles which analyze the representation of food in particular literary works. This choice aims at showing how authors employ different uses for food in distinct literary contexts. The articles are discussed in the next session of this chapter and they are as follows: "Food and Subjectivity in Clara Sereni's *Casalinghitudine*," by Giuliana Menozzi; "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Food in the Novels of Margaret Atwood," by Emma Parker; and "Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoirs of Middle Eastern Exiles," by Carol Bardenstein.

By choosing these articles, especially Bardenstein's and Menozzi's, I intend to demonstrate how food in literature acquires different nuances as it also constitutes as a way of exercising identity, selfhood and power, especially related to gender relationships. As part of this analysis, I briefly discuss the uses of food in Arab American literature, based on a study by Priscilla S. Wathington entitled *Eating Homes: A Critical Inquiry into the Representation of Arab American Identities in Contemporary Arab American Writings on Food*. Besides, I will argue that food in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* is highly associated with storytelling as it serves as a kind of fuel to instigate the storyteller's (Sirine's nameless uncle) creative process.

[8] "a exaltação de alguns pratos da culinária maternal, ou do país de origem, mesmo quando medíocres, pode durar a vida inteira e sua degustação gera, às vezes, associações mentais surpreendentes" (Franco 24).

1.1 Food and Literature

The representation of food in literature provides an interesting arena for exploring identity, ethnicity, gender, class and cultural belonging. By employing food as a literary device, authors create a favorable space to question identity issues and to investigate the intricacies of power relationships and the order of a given society as it is portrayed in distinct literary contexts.

In the article "Food and Subjectivity in Clara Sereni's *Casalinghitudine*," – the book was later translated from Italian into English, by Giovanna Miceli Jeffries and Susan Briziarelli, under the title of *Keeping House: a Novel in Recipes* – Italian critic Giuliana Memozzi analyzes the significance of food imagery in Sereni's novel and remarks that "food is chosen as an assembling principle meant to provide a narrative structure" (217). The title of the article itself – "Food and Subjectivity" – offers interesting insights on the connection between food and the self. Sereni's narrative sways between "recipes and memories" where "[e]ach section starts with recipes, some of which become the ground of recollections of people and experiences from the past and the present" (217). By employing food as a structuring device, Sereni explores the many facets of food. As Memozzi comments, "the many dimensions of food in *Casalinghitudine* rest on the fact that it is envisaged as a space of and for meditation" (218). Indeed, food in Sereni's work appears as a source of strength, not biologically speaking, but, it is rather the source of self-esteem and a way in which the narrator asserts "her independence" (219). Thus, it signifies "her way to freedom," as Memozzi remarks.

According to Italian critic, in *Casalinghitudine* food cannot be dissociated from freedom and the result of it is that it also offers the protagonist the ground from which

she reaches "some degree of autonomy" (220). As Memozzi puts it, "eating and cooking . . . evoke the mother, the first relationship we had with her" (222), thus food imagery provides the possibility of re-creating affective moments and memories of the protagonist with her mother. Indeed, old recipes that bring childhood memories to the surface make it possible for Sereni's protagonist to re-create the moments spent with her mother in the kitchen. Memozzi writes that

> in *Casalinghitudine* the narrator is recreating her mother through the recipes. In cooking, eating, and introjecting food (activities of a strong oral nature), she is engaged in re-inventing the original relationship with her mother, when she was nurtured and no discontinuities intervened between them. (224)

As she concludes, besides being a way of exercising autonomy and selfhood, food becomes the site for recreating the affective relationship with the mother. It is indeed true that food in literature, besides working as a source of strength and affective memories, also mirrors the political, sexual, and social life of any given society, as Emma Parker writes in the article "You Are What You Eat: The Politics of Eating in the Novels of Margaret Atwood." In her article, Parker states that

> Atwood displays a profound preoccupation with eating in her writing . . . in her novels eating is employed as a metaphor for power and is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men. The powerful are characterized by their eating and the powerless by their non-eating. (349)

As Parker claims, by focusing mainly in *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman*, critics have given little or no importance to the theme of food in Atwood's other novels.

Besides analyzing the novels just mentioned above and others such as *Life Before Men*, *Surfacing*, *Bodily Harm*, *Cat's Eyes* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, Parker states that "all Atwood's heroines initially appear as victims, and they demonstrate their powerlessness through their relationship with food" (350). Eating in the novels, thus, becomes an expression of power whereas the non-eating is a sign of powerlessness; it appears as a form of deprivation and victimization of women as the men in the novels exert power over women's lives by controlling their food and even what they order in a restaurant. Indeed, eating is a mark of power relationships – related to control and sexual politics. Especially in *Life Before Men,* Parker remarks that

> the significance of food in sexual politics is illustrated by the fact that most meetings in the novel take place over meals. The pervasive image of rooting food and the pervading aura of rancid decay it emanates powerfully evoke a sense of unhealthiness of relationships based on the pursuit of power. (353)

In fact, the most intriguing analysis the critic provides between food and power is related to the novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, when she claims that

> one of the main ways the system of oppression is enforced is through food. The handmaids have no choice about what they eat and are permitted to consume only that which the authorities consider will enhance their health and fertility . . . by controlling what they eat, the Gilead regime gains direct control over the handmaid's body. (354)

In fact, as she demonstrates, controlling food is metaphorically a form of controlling women's strength. By rejecting food, the main characters of the novel also reject living under such an oppressive regime. As Parker continues,

> Like Rennie in prison, Offred associates food with freedom. One of her memories of the pre-Gilead period is of being able to eat what she liked. Her reluctance to eat the food she is given suggests that she subconsciously realizes she is being controlled by what she eats. Her physical rejection of the food symbolizes her mental and emotional rejection of the tyrannical regime she lives under. (354)

Indeed, for those characters the very act of rejecting food is a form of empowerment and freedom. Parker contends that, "[f]or all Atwoodian heroines the search for selfhood is symbolized by the search for something satisfying to eat" (356-57). The critic also ponders that food is the way women articulate their lives in the novels and it becomes the medium through which they can subvert the patriarchal system. Indeed, food becomes the language they use to express their anxieties and struggle to set free from such oppressive system in which they are inserted. Food and eating, thus, figure as a strong form of articulation of feelings and emotions. As Parker contends,

> food functions as a muted form of female self-expression, but, more than that, it also becomes a medium of experience. Food imagery saturates the novels and becomes the dominant metaphor the heroines use to describe people, landscape, and emotion. (358)

In the end of her article, the critic suggests that by depicting women in a subversive way, Atwood is calling women to transcend such systems of oppression. She concludes that

> Eating expresses the ineffable. By writing about women and food, Atwood exposes one of the most subtle and subconscious ways in which power operates. . . . By demonstrating how consumption is related to power, Atwood subtly urges women to empower themselves by urging them to eat their way into the world. (367)

In her analysis of Atwood's novels, Parker depicts how food and eating are used as a form denouncing women's oppression by the patriarchal ideology that permeates the system in which they are inserted. Food, thus, is a form of power and plays a central role in the formation of women's selfhood and it provides them with opportunity to exert control over their lives. Thus, as stated earlier, it is a muted language of women's self-expression.

In "Transmissions Interrupted: Reconfiguring Food, Memory, and Gender in the Cookbook-Memoirs of Middle-Eastern Exiles," however; food becomes a form of articulation of nostalgia and longing for the lost homeland. In the article, Carol Bardenstein shows that for the exile, food and the senses related to the lost homeland "became invested with all glories" (353). Tasting the food served outside the homeland, Bardenstein remarks, becomes a way of "articulating their longing for the world from which they have been absented due to circumstances beyond their control, of gathering together in a poignant attempt to commune with that world by partaking of a disconnected fragment of it" (353).

Food, as well as other fragments in the form of "photographs, letters, songs," as Bardenstein claims, becomes a form of bringing memories into surface – thus, turning into a catalyst of early experiences. Bardenstein argues that some cookbook-memoirs present a reconfiguration of pre-established roles such as the ones related to class, gender, identity and collective memory. According to her, "new configurations of memory take shape and new performances and presentations of identification emerge, pointedly inflected in terms of gender, class, ethnic affiliation, that would not have emerged in these particular forms if not for the experience of displacement" (355). Displacement, as presented in novels that focus on exile, is drastically responsible for reconfiguring the way exiles deal with the new home and its effects are mirrored in their literature, as Bardenstein puts it.

The three articles briefly summarized here served as a starting point and later a point of comparison with the literary corpus of my thesis. The affirmations made concerning other works made me think about them with regard to Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. They all focus on the very aspect of food being closely linked to memory and identity which is of great relevance to my research. First of all, in Menozzi's analysis what really calls my attention is the way the main character in Carla Sereni's novel exerts her autonomy and selfhood through a complex relationship with food and recipes. Similarly, in *Crescent*, Sirine, the chef, also exerts selfhood by cooking the Arab dishes, and, like the main character in *Casalinghitudine*, she re-creates the affective memories of her mother in the kitchen by the very act of cooking. Sirine's memories of her parents, in most cases, are the ones in which they are in the kitchen cooking together, as I will discuss later. Food, then, is the ground of recollections and expressions of emotions, both for Sirine and Sereni's protagonist. It allows them to give meanings to their lives.

Parker's and Bardenstein's articles are also particularly important because, in my view, *Crescent* clearly presents a shift of roles in relation to power and gender. Although it is not the focus of my research, it becomes relevant because some displaced immigrant characters, as I discuss later, question their lives in the new country where there is a clear shift of configuration in relation to gender differences – for instance, the fact that women and men cannot sit together at the same table, as we see in the episode of the Thanksgiving dinner in Abu-Jaber's novel.

Parker's article provides interesting insights on the relationship between food and power. This made me think about the ways in which power relationship is depicted in Abu-Jaber's novel. If, on the one hand, in Atwood's novels food is reasoned to women and they have little or no control over their lives, in *Crescent*, on the other hand, the few women characters Sirine, Um-Nadia (the café owner), and her daughter Mireille are the ones who cook and control the food served in the café, mainly to male regulars. To a certain extent, it suggests that the male immigrant characters are powerless because of the adversities they find in the host country and this nostalgia is demonstrated through their complex relationships with the food cooked by Sirine. In other words, eating provides the opportunity for these characters to exteriorize their deepest feelings of loneliness and homesickness. In a certain way, this assumption is supported by Bardenstein's contention that new forms of identification are created by those individuals in exile. Despite focusing on cookbook-memoirs written by exiles, Bardenstein's claim offered me some hints to understand the very formation of a community of different ethnicities in *Crescent*. Food, thus, becomes the common language Abu-Jaber employs to the novel so as to discuss political and ethnic aspects concerning this diasporic community.

Specially related to Arab-American literature, Priscilla S. Wathington provides an interesting overview of the representation of food. In her master's thesis entitled *Eating Homes: A Critical Inquiry into the Representation of Arab American Identities in Contemporary Arab American Writings on Food*, Wathington traces the history of the literary production of Arab American writers taking into consideration the features that tell each generation apart. Interestingly, she points out that "writings on food as a mode of ethnic representation have provoked particular controversy within the Arab-American writing community readership" since "the concern, for many, is that food is simply too sweet a dish to serve up" (4).

According to her, the writings on food can be divided into two categories: old world food literature and new world food literature (12). Wathington explains that the first category is made up of writers who use food in a defensive way in order to eradicate the misperception of the Arab identity in the U.S. For her, "the authors straddle multiple generations, writing from the oppositional perspectives of recovering and rediscovering homelands" (14). Wathington insists that the old food literature is marked by elements which reflect the expectations of these authors towards the American readership and they work in a way so as to teach, acknowledge and reinforce Arabness in the U.S. Features such as "cultural instruction," "transmission," and "proof" often appear in the texts analyzed being the later of great importance to create and solidify the Arab identity. She remarks that the three modes or features tell something of the way the authors regard identity (14).

"Cultural instruction," for her, is related to the necessity of eliminating the myth of "Arab primitivism," thus constructing a new image of the group, different from the one which permeates the American imaginary. It works didactically in order to defend Arab integrity. The narratives analyzed, in many cases, present the homeland – the Arab

world – as a "place of beauty, peacefulness, and worthiness of knowing" (15), because they portray the Arab hospitality, as she remarks. Besides teaching the West about the Arab world, it is the task of these authors to prove their knowledge, rootedness, and commitment to the Arab culture to both hyphenated and unhyphenated Arabs, as well as to the American readership as a way of giving credibility to their writings. The intention behind old world food literature is worth of praise. However, it ultimately ends up being founded on the inversion of the well disseminated stereotype of Arabs as primitive. That is, it aims at creating the essentialist view that Arabs are by nature good and the Arab world is home only for positive values such as beauty, hospitality, and so on, instead of portraying it in all its complexity and heterogeneity.

New world food literature, on the other hand, is set in the United States, and, in most cases, it appears as a stage where the tension between the two cultures – Arab and American – is enacted and the consequences for formation of the ethnic self are highlighted. These authors still illustrate the lost homeland back in the Arab world, but, interestingly, the new world for them is the source of material to explore and solidify the Arab-American identity.

One aspect that deserves great attention is the notion of a kind of cultural celebration. In this respect, Abu-Jaber's novels give the idea that Arab Americans are going back in time to the moment when multiculturalism was introduced in the United States, and therefore it is rather problematic. According to Lisa Majaj, the survival of Arab Americans inside a different culture requires from them a significant degree of cultural awareness, that is, a kind of "ethnic celebration." For her, such celebration implies the transmission, from one generation to the next, of values, traditions and the pride of belonging to the Arab culture. Ultimately, though, such celebration involves the feeling of group membership, and, consequently, exposes proudly a collectivity. As part

of the project of manifesting collectivity and preserving the culture of one's ancestors, food becomes a defining element. One must be careful, though, not to fall into the trap of using or reading food in literary works by Arab Americans in a reductionist way that pins them down on a plaid checkboard of cultural representation.

1.2 Food in *Crescent*

In *Crescent*, Arab immigrants identify with the atmosphere of Nadia's Café, also referred to in the novel as Alladin's Hidden Treasure – a little fragment of their homelands. As I will discuss in Chapter II, the café has an important role to play in the plot since it functions as a unifying metaphor, ironically, of Arabs' many – and therefore heterogeneous – homelands. As described in the novel:

> the café is like other places – crowded at meals and quiet in between – but somehow there is also usually a lingering conversation, currents of Arabic that ebb around Sirine, fill her head with mellifluous voices. Always there are the same group of students from the big university up the street, *always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue motes for their wives and children back home, or for the American women they haven't met.* (17, emphasis added)

I also claim that the café functions as the space where memories of past experiences materialize. In a certain way, it takes on the role of a museum: instead of displaying ancient objects that retell stories of the past, it is rather an interactive museum of the senses, where old tastes blend with the new, permeated always by the smell of Sirine's dishes.

As Gardaphé and Xu write, "in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, the language of food offers a portal to ethnic history, culture, and roots. This language forms a gastronomic contact zone situated in cafés, kitchens, and homes where displaced individuals meet and reestablish identities and communities" (7). Indeed, in *Crescent*, it is the café the place where the collective forms and also fosters bonds among the regular customers through the very act of eating and participating in that ritual. The smells and flavors of 'Sirine's food seem to soften the feeling of loss of their homelands. As Carol Fadda-Conrey claims, in Abu-Jaber's novel,

> [t]he most important bridges are Sirine herself and the Middle Eastern food she cooks. From her pivotal position in the kitchen, which opens out to the rest of the café, Sirine serves as an integral connecting link, joining together the different communities and individuals of *Crescent*'s ethnic borderland. (196)

Fadda-Conrey ponders that "Sirine's cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing various characters together, simultaneously, underscores their varied ethnic, national and cultural identities" (199). It is as if the Arab dishes prepared by the chef enter the regulars' nostrils and mouths and invade their minds with the memories of the Arab World, family and friends they left behind. Indeed, Sirine's cooking, explicitly described as anodyne, as well her presence in the café even encourage the students to confess their solitude and lament of being "invisible" in the American culture as once one of them revealed to her:

> How painful [it] is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he'd wanted all his life – sometimes especially if it was what he'd wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don't have

> time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship – days of coffee-drinking and talking – that the Arab students craved. *For many of them the café was a little flavor of home*. (19-20, emphasis added)

The food served at the café is able to call their attention to their inner selves and momentarily the painful experience of missing one's homeland is forgotten. In this perspective, Sirine's presence in the kitchen and her food work as continuous memory rescuer. As a museum, where objects from the past are once again in contact with someone and re-enact the memory of early experiences, so function the food and the café in Abu-Jaber's novel When asked about the character Sirine, Abu-Jaber claimed that she wanted to "draw that kind of internal conflict: what part of me is Iraqi? What part of me is American?" She goes on to question if "it is something that I've inherited, something in the blood or something that people tell me I am?" (Fresh Air).

Being in the café's kitchen, for the chef, makes her feel as if she were in her mother's kitchen again. In fact, as Mercer and Strom express, it is "in the absence of her parents, Sirine attempts to use food and cooking to establish her own narrative of origin" (42). Her parents were emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross and they were killed in a tribal clash in Africa. As the narrator comments, "on the day she learned of their deaths, Sirine went into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself" (Abu-Jaber 50). Cooking the Arab food is the compass she uses to re-create her affective memories of her parents as well as to negotiate her Iraqi identity and meditate upon her life.

Sirine witnesses the regulars' satisfaction as they close their eyes while eating. If, on the one hand, eating her *baklava* makes the Arab students taste home, on the other, cooking this special dish also serves to orient her during the day. As the narrator

comments, “Sirine feels unsettled when she begins breakfast without preparing baklava first; she can’t find her place in things” (59). Moreover, *Crescent* also presents complex webs of food where the characters Sirine and Han seem to be looking for directions all the time. Food, in this way, acquires a different nuance since it offers the ground for those characters to discuss issues of diasporic displacement – location and direction for life.

On the one hand, Sirine is interested in learning about her father’s culture and religion. As she was not raised immersed in her father’s culture she does not understand her connection with the professor and Iraq. Hanif, on the other hand, needs directions to situate himself in the U.S. He declares to Sirine: “I really don’t get the geography of this town.” He continues by saying that, “It seems like things keep swimming around me. [When] I think I know where something is, then it’s gone” (75). He feels displaced and finds in Sirine and in her way of cooking his real north – the needle for his compass.

Several passages from the novel corroborate my contention that food also relates to direction as it is present when these characters question their ideas of belonging and home. For instance, in one of the first contacts between the chef and Hanif, she is in the kitchen when she sees Hanif entering the café. She feels something different and “thinks he does look different from the rest of the customers” (38). At that exact moment, she is making *knaffea* when Um-Nadia wisely says: “Ah, you’ve made knaffea today,” she continues by asking Sirine, “who are [you] in love with, I wonder?” (38). This passage shows an interesting connection between cooking and being in love as Sirine’s first symbolic contact with Han occurs when she serves him “a plate of knaffea herself” (38). The description of the scene shows the impact of that contact not only for the two of them, but also for those sitting at the counter as they seem to be astonished by its intensity, as the passage demonstrates:

> Mirelle and Victor stop talking and Um-Nadia and the customers look up to see this break in precedent, even the two [American] policemen sitting by the TV, eating fried lentils and onions, and watching reports in Arabic about terrorists from Saudi Arabia. (38)

In the very moment the chef serves Han, the narrator describes her desire to give him the food. In fact, as it is mentioned, Sirine "has an impulse to sit and feed him by hand" (39). She has a maternal instinct as if she knew his fragility and the uncertainty of his life in the U.S. The *knaffea*, as described, is to be a dish of love; by offering Han the dish Sirine is metaphorically offering her love to him.

According to Um-Nadia, the *knaffea* "is said to be so delicious that it brings even the *wild animals* home" (39, emphasis added). Mirelle, Um-Nadia's daughter, asks about it as if not quite understanding the implicit meaning which her mother employs to the expression. Han, in his turn, says: "[a]ll those stories about the animals – the *jemel* and *asfoori* and the *ghazal,*" then he asks the name of the last one in English. Nathan answers him by saying that the name is Oryx. Han continues by saying that "[w]ell, the *ghazal* is always wandering, looking for his lost love, and they say he has to go away before he can find his way home again" (39). Even the wild animals look for love. As the passage demonstrates, Han is similar to the *ghazal*. He is also looking for his real love and directions, but when he really finds them in Sirine and her food, he returns to Iraq. He fled Iraq due to political issues and when away from home his contact with the chef gives him the directions he needs to return to this homeland and bury the traumatic memories he carries. It is worth discussing that Um-Nadia's statement seems to be predicting or giving the reader the clues to understand the end of the novel, the moment

when Hanif goes back home despite running the risk of being killed by Saddam Hussein's men.

The triangle love / food / identity plays an important role in the novel as it allows the characters to question their lives. For Sirine, the symbolic act of cooking becomes a way of expressing and questioning her fears regarding Hanif and her connection to Iraq. Her food brings the professor closer to her. It is so uncomfortable for the chef to deal with the sensations he causes in her, but, at the same time, she feels something enigmatic in relation to him. She thinks that "Han seems to have some sort of *internal light* that makes him intriguing and, at the same time, a little bit hard for her to look directly, he's so charming and educated and worldly" (47, emphasis added). Han wants to teach Sirine about Iraq and the portion of the Arab culture she does not know, whereas Sirine teaches him about the U.S. and the intricacies of being American. Moreover, Sirine, on the one hand, "has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what is that she is missing" (62). Actually, she unconsciously misses her other ethnic half – the one in which she had never had interest until her contact with Hanif. So, the professor has "the light" Sirine needs to understand her father's cultural roots. In an article about *Crescent*, Nouri Gana defines the love story between Han and Sirine as a "refreshing journey of self-discovery and cultural reinvention" (238). As he remarks,

> In the McCarthyistic atmosphere of post-9/11 and the heightened politicization of Arab identity, it is only fair, Abu-Jaber seems to contend, that the likes of Sirine should first become aware of portions of her identity that might need to be accounted for, even prior to understanding how such portions

> have a concrete bearing on her otherwise tranquil American identity. (238)

On the other hand, Sirine carries the secret of the Arab recipes and they seem to make Han comfortable when he is in contact with her. Even her intimate impressions concerning the professor are described through the metaphor of food, especially when she is in the Victory Market trying out new flavors. The scent of the spices "make her think of Han – somehow, everything seems redolent, brimming with suggestions of Han . . . [t]he intimate proximity of Han's body comes back to her now, the scent of his skin echoed in the rich powder of spices" (111). Moreover, when Sirine makes love to him for the first time, her sensations are also connected to food: "He's amber and caramel and earth-colored. His skin excites her; she inhales deeply, as if she could take in his essence; he tastes of almond, of sweetness" (113). Making love to him, as it is described, means a new sensation to her, the one she had never felt when cooking; after that she inhales the scent of his arms that, for her, "smell like bread" (114).

Searching for directions leads Sirine to have her first contact with Rana, Hanif's student, who takes her to the reunion of the group "Women in Islam." According to Rana, the importance of having Sirine attend the meeting lies in the fact the she is "such a model to the young women" (166). The gathering is made up of a few women "fully cloaked in veils and floor-length black dress; the rest are dressed in pants and cardigans, jeans and blouses" (168). This description well portrays Sirine's situation since the latter women are the ones emerged in the American culture, but, at the same time, unlike the chef, they are aware of their female and Muslim condition.

For Sirine, being in the meeting is an opportunity to discover part of her Iraqi identity as she would be closer to her father's roots. Adding to that, the chef would learn more about Han and "the pieces of things he didn't seem able to tell her about" (168).

However, the meeting goes beyond just a women's conversation, and ends up assuming a political aspect as some of them, especially Rana, question the negative stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood films. It is also an occasion to discuss the American occupation in Iraq and it is the time when Hanif's student, ironically, seems to be the only woman aware of the unstable situation in the homeland; she also claims that terrorists just come from the passivity of the other women who "just want to be Americans like everyone else" (170) and do not fight rooted stereotypes of violent Arabs. Here, this passage offers an interesting insight on the meaning of safety for immigrants. Some see the idea of Americaness as a synonym of "safety", while others just consider it a form of "alienation," as Rana points out.

Similarly, Han sees in Sirine the possibility of feeling closer to the American culture. It also shows that being American – no matter if hyphenated or not – gives him the sensation of protection against any danger. He declares to her that when he looks at her he feels "free-falling," a sort of entire surrender, and the reason for this feeling, he confesses a few lines later, is a sort of envy: "You are the place I want to be – you're the opposite of exile. When I look at you – when I touch you – I feel ease. I feel joy. It's like you know *some sort of secret*, Hayati, a key to being alive – to living…" (140, emphasis added). His fascination towards the chef is much more connected to the way she cooks and the secret Hanif mentions in this passage, besides her Americaness, is her ability to cook and her recipes. Besides the physical attraction, the *baklava* is also one of the connectors between her and the professor.

Cooking also takes Sirine back to her childhood helping her mother to prepare *baklava*. The chef remembers her parents preparing the traditional dessert – an intimate ritual – where complicity and love are intimately linked. In this way, witnessing her parents in the kitchen made it clear to her how they loved each other, as their "concerted

movements" to prepare the dish was like 'a dance' where "they swam together through the round arcs of her mother's arms and her father's tender strokes" (58-59). The ritual of making *baklava* together, as described in the novel, strongly resembles a private relationship. As Sirine's parents spent little time with her because of their job, she would feel "proud" to contribute in the preparation of the dish of love. Once again, this particular element functioned as a human connector, to put it in Abu-Jaber's terms, this time not between her and Hanif or her and the café regulars, but between Sirine and her parents.

It is in the back kitchen of Nadia's café that Sirine and Hanif prepare their first *baklava* together – echoing her memories of her parents in the kitchen. Despite the fact of not knowing how to dance as her parents did while preparing the dessert together, the chef knows how to cook, and, in a similar manner, makes that act a moment of bonding with the professor and consolidating their love.

During this ritual of food preparation Han experiences a feeling of homesickness. The loneliness of being away from his family seems expose his fragility. He declares to Sirine how he even misses his mother's coffee and bread. He also ends up asserting that he misses everything: "Absolutely everything" (61). Now I come to a crucial point of my analysis since the atmosphere of intimacy that surrounds the back kitchen and the *baklava* make Hanif disclose his past and confess his fears towards returning to Iraq – a deeper thought that he cannot quite grasp. He affirms: "I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet" (62). Indeed, the back kitchen is the stage which embodies the atmosphere of complicity; it is the place for revelations, confessions, and love, an issue I will address in the next chapter. In that place Hanif gives Sirine his phone number and his address not only as a

way of consolidating their relationship, but also as a way to point her to the routes to enter and discover the mysteries of his life.

So far I have discussed different nuances of food in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* as it seems to acquire distinct functions such as bonding distinct ethnic groups, working as an ethnic bonding agent, my main contention. Besides that, food has a straight connection to memory and orientation, also discussed above. It is while eating that Sirine and Han question about their lives, origin and connections to each other. Moreover, the Arab food – mostly *baklava* and *knaffea* – is strongly connected to love. The very act of cooking and eating these dishes powerfully ties Sirine and Hanif together, strengthening their love. Food, thus, becomes a strong metaphor of love, using Michel De Certeau's remarks. According to De Certeau, by offering food in a romantic dinner, one is also offering his or her body to be metaphorically devoured (De Certeau 265). The food then becomes something seductive and the body also becomes an object to satisfy the lovers' hunger.

Something similar occurs in *Crescent* when Hanif kindly prepares a dinner to for Sirine. Ironically, despite being a chef, the dinner is something especially new to Sirine as "no one ever wants to cook for her" (68).The dinner itself stands out as a good example of food translation from the novel, a form of translating cultural experiences. In that occasion, Hanif meant to be "all American" for Sirine, as if forgetting she was half Arab and also playing with his own identity. The professor is completely excited about cooking for her, and, curiously, one of the recipe books he uses to accomplish the dishes is the well known and popular cookbook entitled *The Joy of Cooking*. A similar joy that Sirine feels when cooking at Nádia's Café, seems to take hold of the professor:

> Han just seems excited – his skin slightly damp and pink from the kitchen heat – and intrigued by the new kind of cooking, a

> shift of ingredients like a move from native tongue into a foreign language: butter instead of olive oil; potatoes instead of rice; beef instead of lamb. (68)

By the very act of replacing the ingredients, Hanif is also playing with the possibilities of momentarily becoming "American." Being in a new environment allows him new possibilities to forge an identity – differently from the stigmatized Iraqi one. The language of food permits Hanif to feel closer to Sirine. As the professor nurtures a desire of being safe, he finds in the act of cooking the means of being on the safe side of the American cultural hyphen.

The dinner strongly captivates Sirine to the point that she praises Hanif and the food. Adding to that, the scene portrays an interesting shift of roles, as Hanif is in the position usually occupied by Sirine, he is the chef now, and she takes on the role of appreciating that precious unusual moment, as a regular customer; just like a shift of ingredients. As a food expert, Sirine approves the dishes as if she could tell each ingredient apart: "Mm, the rich texture of this meat loaf–the egg and breadcrumbs–and these bits of onion are so good, and there's little chili powder and dry mustard, isn't there? It's lovely. And there's something in the sauce…something…" (68-69)

The chef shows her familiarity with the ingredients, tasting them meticulously, when Hanif wisely observes "'The way you taste things…' He gestures over the food, picks up a bite of meat loaf in his fingers as if it were an olive. 'You know what every thing here is – I mean exactly'" (69). The quotation also reinforces Hanif's envy in relation to Sirine's American background; in fact, she is also in search of hints that could help her understand the Arab portion of herself, just like he is. Sirine denies such a comment, claiming that "it's so basic, anyone can do that. It's like you just taste the starting places – where it all came from" (69). The chef thinks that good food should be

straightly connected to its origin. In other words, food becomes a fragment of the old home. She ponders: "You know, so the best butter tastes a little like pastures and flowers, that sort of stuff. Things show their origins" (69). This context of intimacy provides an opportunity for Sirine to question Hanif about his life in Iraq. He teaches her a little about the cultural aspects of his homeland such as the History of Andaloussya, "a place where the Muslims and Jews lived together and devised miraculous works of philosophy and architecture," (70) and religious rituals.

> He describes what the interior of a mosque looks like, its clean open prayer hall, and – after much coaxing – he recites the *athan,* the call to prayers, to Sirine outside on the floor of his balcony. It sounds like singing to Sirine, but he says no – this is praying, which is pure. *He hesitates a moment, as if he can't quite remember*, then demonstrates the postures and genuflections for praying – bowing from waist to knees to head. (71, emphasis added)

The quotation shows how Sirine has little knowledge about her father's religion just as it shows Hanif's lack of familiarity with his religious faith. He confesses to her: "haven't prayed in some time, I'm out of practice" (71). Besides that, he tells the chef about personal details of his life such as studying in England, his few girlfriends, and the unstable political situation in Iraq. Besides, Han "talks about trying to sleep when he could hear gunfire and soldiers in the street, never feeling entirely safe, always wanting to run away" (73).

If cooking is the means the professor uses to captivate the chef, it is also through food that he tries to regain Sirine's confidence after his explosive behavior during

Nathan's second exhibition, an episode I will discuss in more detail in Chapter II. Food, at this time, becomes the medium he finds to ask for forgiveness.

> Han apologizes to Sirine all week long, bringing her gorgeous fruits with spikes and horns, edible peels and blood-red seeds, baskets of berries from the other side of the other side of the world. But the presents only increase her guilt and anxiety, so by the end of the week she can barely eat anything, her stomach knotting against food. (265)

The chef seems to be confused about the situation and Han realizes it.

> He can tell that she's unsettled and he asks if it's because of the scene at Nathan's exhibit, or the fact that he didn't call her right away, or because she thought she saw him with another woman, or some other reason altogether. All of which she denies. (265)

Hanif is so determined to have Sirine's forgiveness that he even takes some flowers to her, "some branches of scented jasmine and flowering bougainvillea twined and wired around the rim of her bicycle basket" (265). After that, in that same evening, the chef goes to his apartment where she can smell the scent of the food he is cooking from all the way down the hall.

Interestingly enough, there are plates of food in the living room just like in a ritual, by offering food; Hanif is, metaphorically, asking the goddess Sirine – the Queen of Sheba, as he passionately calls her – to forgive him for his explosive behavior. The description of the scene strongly echoes their first night of love together: "there are plates of food set out on a blanket on the floor of his living room. Even an azure cotton tablecloth and pitcher of yellow daisies, a fragrant steam in the air" (266).Through this

very romantic way of asking for forgiveness, Hanif succeeds in having Sirine again and, in such atmosphere they end up making love.

1.3 "I Want to Tell You a Story": Food and Storytelling

The title of this section is a direct quotation to the "The Chandelier," a short-story written by Lebanese-American author Gregory Orfalea. The story is about Mukhlis, a Lebanese man, who nearly sacrificed his life to save his family during World War I, when the Germans and the ally army had taken hold over all the Arab lands. As a consequence, the whole region ran out of food and water for years. As times goes on and the situation becomes worse, Mukhlis, a young boy at that time, decides to leave his village in search for food. After a long way walking, Mukhlis arrives in an abandoned monastery and finds a huge crystal chandelier which he decides to take in order to trade for food – milk and bread. By the end of the story, Mukhlis is able to save his family from starvation. Food then serves as a contrast between his scarce past when he lived in Lebanon and the present of abundance he has in the U.S.

Through the medium of food, the story works with binary oppositions – life/death – in a daring way, showing how the border between them is very tenuous. Hunger and abundance operate the same way. On the one hand, food in abundance for Mukhlis's sister, Matile, seems to work not only as nourishment, but also as a way of compensating for the traumatic memories of her scarce past back in Lebanon. On the other hand, it is quite interesting that the excess of Arab food is used by Matile as a prompt for Mukhlis' story. She uses food as an aid to remind her that her past is gone and her present is different and Mukhlis' narrative has a didactic function as well: to teach his grandnephew about the values of life, telling his suffering and the effort he

made to feed his family. He tells the young man: "it's time for you to get serious and stop this wandering and get a good job in business," and he continues by saying, "you are playing with your life. When are you going to get married?" (348).

Insightfully, Brenda Laurel points out that "throughout our history, cultures, families, and individual lives have been held together by webs of storytelling relationships" (xvii, qtd in De Vos). Stories told within the family domain are powerful tools for educating children. Storytelling teaches and transmits to children family morals and other aspects of social life. Within immigrant families, for instance, storytelling is a way of recalling the past, as Orfalea's story shows. It may be a way of forgetting the adversities of the past and worshiping the present situation when most immigrants find themselves better off financially. Ruth Stotter entitles the introduction of De Vos's book as "We are Made of Stories." This assertion could not be more appropriate for this discussion as stories are part of the formation of human selfhood and character. Indeed, family stories carry symbolic meanings and didactic aspects, acting effectively in a person's life, especially enhancing self-esteem and his identity.

In a similar manner, food in *Crescent* also appears as a kind of fuel that Sirine uses to instigate her nameless uncle to tell the mythical tale of the adventures of Abdelrahman Salahadin.[9] The significance of food in both narratives by Arab-American writers lies in the very fact that the embedded narratives are permeated with food – all sorts of food. Both Sirine, in Abu-Jaber's novel, and Matile, in Orfalea's story, use food to fulfill a maternal instinct they have and also as a fuel for other characters to recall the richness of details of their tales.

In *Telling Tales: Storytelling in the Family*, Gail De Vos, Merle Harris, and Celia Barker Lottridge write about the power of storytelling as a form of strengthening

[9] From now on I will use Abdel to refer to Abdelrahman Salahadin.

bonds among individuals. As they say, “storytelling is relationship” (xvi) and it gives the storyteller the opportunity of exercising his or her ability of captivating family members and people around them during the ritual of telling a story. Besides that, stories carry the tradition of a group; they reinforce its values and expected behaviors.

Recalling her own experience as a storyteller, Gail De Vos writes that “telling stories with my children allowed me the freedom to become the heroine I always thought I should be, given a different time and place. I could ‘correct’ the misperceptions that blonde heroines were better than brunets” (xxiv). Indeed, stories help to eliminate stereotypical views as they work didactically showing expected behaviors or breaking up with norms that distort the way a certain group of people should conceive of themselves. The imaginative power of a good story told with the proper richness of details and fictional ingredients, besides entertaining, gives the real sense of values and codes involved in living in a certain society.

As De Vos remarks,

> we tell jokes, relate experiences, give explanations, and talk about things we’ve done. All of these everyday stories help us articulate our thoughts, emotions, and impressions. Storytelling is not limited to stage performances, but encompasses our experiences and daily life . . . [a] story is a natural package for transmitting an experience to others in a form they will be able to easily decode and understand. (3-4)

Stories usually carry the intention of presenting life’s experience in an imaginative and enigmatic way of transmitting truths. Moreover, De Vos writes, “storytelling is not the transmission of ‘lies’ but rather the uncovering of ‘truths,’ giving the listener a glimpse inside the world of the teller’s imagination and memory” (5).

"Sometimes", however, De Vos claims, "the links between the pieces are never found and need the imagination and vision of the storyteller in the family to place them in context" (21).

The act of telling and passing on messages through storytelling is performed in *Crescent* by the figure of Sirine's uncle. Indeed, the parallel story he tells is not just a transmission of 'lies,' as De Vos pointed out, but it carries key elements for the understanding of the main frame story of Sirine and Hanif. In fact, the mythical tale the uncle tells and the novel's main plot go hand-in-hand to uncover different layers of meanings in the end of the novel. In some passages, as I further discuss, not only Sirine and her uncle are familiar with Abdel, the slave who is the main character in the embedded narrative, but also other characters in Abu-Jaber's work seem to be also aware of the slave's existence. As it is suggested, reality and fantasy cannot be dissociated and the resulting experience is that both carry the password to decipher the resolution of the main plot.

In Abu-Jaber's novel, at the beginning of each chapter, the reader is presented with pieces of the mythical tale of Abdel and his mother Camille and, interestingly, many passages are permeated with the presence of Arab food. In a first glance, this may be unimportant, but it gains relevance as the story develops and approaches its resolution. The story mixes fantastic elements, such as mermaids, with icons of the Western culture, such as the explorer Richard Burton and film star Omar Sharif – ironically enough, from Egypt. Hollywood also appears as a stage for the fantastic tale. The frame story presented in *Crescent* offers an interesting insight on the importance of storytelling as a way of passing on traditions and discussing political issues such as being Arab. As the following passage demonstrates,

> Slavery has been outlawed in most Arab countries for years now. But there are villages in Jordan made up entirely of the descendants of runaway Saudi slaves. Abdelrahman knows he might be free, but he's still an Arab. No one ever wants to be the Arab – it's too old and too tragic and too mysterious and too exasperating and too lonely for anyone but an actual Arab to put up with for very long. (48)

The above quotation illustrates the idea which permeates the imaginary of early generations of Arab descent, especially those living in the U.S. They are caught within two cultures, but, in a certain way, they seem to deny their connection with the Arab world in order to avoid facing the negative stereotypes that the term Arab might engender. Sirine's uncle continues by saying that "Persians, Turks, even Lebanese and Egyptians – none of them want to be the Arab" (48). Being Arab, as the passage shows, carries a strong negative connotation. It is an identity that hurts, something people of Arab descent feel ashamed of assuming, and Abu-Jaber uses fantasy (that is, a fantastic embedded narrative) to discuss it. What is even more interesting to notice is how, paradoxically, at the same time that the novel portrays a denial, or a desire not to be Arab so as to avoid stigmatism, it also nurtures this very demonized background with traditional foods that pervade the characters' lives and the act of storytelling.

The unstable political situation in the Arab region and the recent terrorist attacks of 9/11 have been affecting directly those descendants of Arabs living in America. They find themselves caught in a culture that seems to deny them full citizenship, despite the fact of classifying them as whites – or "honorary whites" as Lisa Majaj remarks. Nouri Gana also offers an insightful analysis of Arabness in *Crescent*. Gana discusses that being Arab has become a site of interdiction, a confinement to a choice

between two alternative non-existences: being Arab or not being; that is, being disempowered in either case. According to the critic, "Abu-Jaber seems to suggest, in other words, that no one is Arab without the pain of being Arab, only a drowned one" (241). Indeed, as the critic continues, identifying one's self as Arab "is to surrender it to the preexisting discourses that hijack, confiscate, and empty it out of the social text of its largely elegiac and diasporic content in the service of an objectifying and terrifying perception" (241). Gana's opinions meet my impressions as some characters in the novel, especially those of Arab descent adopt a discourse of assimilation to the American culture when in fact they are denied any form of Americaness for reasons I have discussed above.

As my analysis sought to demonstrate, the uncle's role as a storyteller is always triggered by the presence of the Arab food served by Sirine. As De Vos claims, "[f]ood, generally, is a great source of stories" (24), and Sirine seems to be aware of this fact by offering her uncle food to start telling the tale. As it appears in the first lines of chapter two of the novel,

> Sirine's uncle leans forward over their kitchen table, watching Sirine as she scrapes a little more tabbouleh salad on to his dinner plate. "'I'm so full, Habeebti,' he says. 'Really, I couldn't eat another bite."
>
> "You didn't eat any vegetables at all." She stands and places the dishes in the sink. When she turns back, however, he is biting into a large, walnut-stuffed ma'mul cookie. She puts her hands on her lips.

> "So," he says quickly, dusting crumbs away as if he could hide evidence. Isn't it time for the next chapter of the moralless tale of Abdelrahman Salahadin?" (23)

Adding to that, in the next chapter, Sirine also offers him food when the uncle wisely says: "I would just like to point out at this moment, for the record, that accomplished uncles and storytellers are usually rewarded with plates of knaffea pastry. For the record. Then we can get on with our story" (34). Food, in this perspective, works as a catalyst for another chapter of the frame story. It is the fuel the uncle needs to fabricate and perpetuate his tale.

The uncle himself is an interesting figure with his endless desire of naturally telling stories to Sirine and those people around him, stories fabricated with vivid details that even puzzle the listeners. The place he tells the story to Sirine in the novel is described as "the room of imagined books" (15). In that room, "[e]verything smells of books: an odor of forgotten memories. This is the library of imagined books, her uncle says, because he never reads any of them" (15). The uncle's joy in telling the story echoes De Vos when she claims that "when the storyteller thoroughly enjoys the story and can see the characters, setting, and action clearly in his or her own mind during the telling much of the art of storytelling comes naturally" (80).

Indeed, in my view, the uncle's narrative resembles Scheherazade's classic in the storytelling tradition of A *Thousand and One Nights* in which the main story is about the frustrated relationship between the king and his bride. Disappointed to discover the infidelity of his brother's wife and his own wife's betrayal, the king begins to choose only virgins to marry so as to kill them next day before they could betray him as well. It is told that Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter, offers herself to become the king's wife. In the night of their honeymoon, Scheherazade begins to tell the king a

story – in fact, she does not finish it, rousing in the king the curiosity to know the ending. Indeed, she forces the king to postpone her execution so as to know the conclusion of her narrative. The story goes on and on for one thousand and one nights.

A similar narrative technique is employed in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, as she presents a story within a story, where the main frame in a first glance has more importance in content, but its layers of meaning are unfolded little by little as the frame tale is decoded. As Abu-Jaber states in an interview, she "wanted [the frame story] to function as a kind of looking glass for the characters, that would in some way reflect upon motifs of their reality in an indirect way" (221). As the uncle acknowledges, "old stories that gather in the collective unconscious of a family – are like mirages. Illusory and fantastic, and yet they are frequently based on some reflection of reality" (189).

More than the use of a story within a story, Abu-Jaber, through the character of the uncle, clearly seems to test the reader's ability to listen and go in deeper in the tale of the slave as if offering the password to decipher the enigma of Hanif's life. At the very beginning of the novel, the uncle promises to tell Sirine the whole tale only if she behaves because, as he kindly calls her, she is the "Miss Hurry Up American," as she is not patient enough to listen and unfold the various layers of meanings of the tale. In another passage, the uncle warns not only Sirine, but also the reader:

> Are you paying attention? The moralless story [is a story of how to love and it] requires, of course, greater care and general alertness than your run-of-the-mill, everyday story with a moral, which basically gives you the Cliffs Notes version of itself in the end anyway. A moralless story is deep yet takes no longer to tell than it takes to steep a cup of mint tea. (78)

Besides that, as my reading of both main plot and frame story suggests, Abu-Jaber is also playing with the binary reality/imagination. Sirine and her uncle are at Nathan's exhibition called "Photography Against Art: Real Scenes by Nathan Green." As it is described, they are observing the photographs and "her uncle stops by one of the drowning man portrait for a moment and smiles as if recognizing a friend. He nods and turns away. 'Well, he is an unusual fellow', he says" (33). The figure of the "drowning man" also appears in the uncle's tale and it could perfectly be related to Abdel himself and, in this way, it puts into question how the boundary between reality and fantasy is fluid. The moralless tale is brought to life through the use of photographs; it becomes "Real Scenes" – as real as food.

The figure and the tale of the slave also seem to puzzle those who listen to it, as it is suggested in the episode at Loon's pool party. Sirine and Hanif are in the pool and her uncle is "telling stories to a small group of academics, some of whom look drowsy. Others look confused and bored as they scout around for new party arrivals. "I don't understand," Fred Perlman from the History Department is saying. "This is a true story? Or it isn't?" (45). The uncle's tale bothers those listeners as they do not seem to be patient enough to hear and grasp the meanings the tale carries. However, only "a dark-eyed woman in leather dress" (45) seems to acknowledge very the importance of listening to the tale in detail in order to understand it properly. As she remarks, the gorgeousness of the tale lies in the very fact that "it's just like acting in commercials – you just have to give yourself to it, let yourself be it, and it all comes true" (45).

The woman's remarks echoes the uncle's advice to be attentive to the slave's tale, as just mentioned some passages above. He notices the woman's interest:

> Sirine's uncle nods and points at the leather-dress woman, then rocks back in the lounge chair, searching for his cup of black

> coffee. “You see? Now she understands everything.” He tries to prop the coffee back up in the grass. “Now, where were we? Ah yes, Abdelrahman Salahadin is consulting with a seahorse….” (45)

Besides reinforcing the importance of being a good listener, the above quotation also reinforces my claim of food as a catalyst of stories; however, the food here is not a solid food like *knaffea* or *baklava*, but rather is in liquid form: coffee. This time, the coffee, a worldwide appreciated drink, also takes on this role of fuel that seems to inspire the uncle to keep on narrating Abdel’s tale.

Han and Sirine, still in the pool, observe an Arab crescent and listen to her uncle’s story for a while. Curiously, Han is familiar with the slave. “‘Abdelrahman Salahadin.’ Han murmurs. ‘What?’ He raises his head slightly and his eyes are black and shining and still. ‘Your uncle’s story. It’s so familiar’” (46). Han is also referring back to the tradition of storytelling from the Middle East, specifically in Iraq. As he remarks, “in Iraq everyone tells jokes and fables. It’s too difficult to say anything directly” (46). In fact, as the main story and the frame tale show, the best way of saying things is by covering them with symbolic metaphors in order to reach the audience. Thus, in *Crescent*, the tale works as this form of indirectly discussing issues of love, politics, and identity.

Another passage that corroborates my claim that Abdel’s existence defies the boundary between reality and fiction in the novel lies in the very end of the story when the “drowning man” (or Abdel himself) and Hanif become one single character. Gana also provides an insightful view of this fact in the embedded story:

> the uncle’s story feels at first like no more than an intolerable digression, an endurance test for the reader’s patience, but,

> toward the end of the novel – when Han reemerges in Iraq bearing the name of the same mythical figure of the uncle's story, i.e. Abdelrahman Salahadin – it becomes of particular relevance to an understanding of the competing mythical, historical, and cultural forces that factor in the makeup of an Arab and an Arab American identity. When Hanif reappears in Iraq under the name of Abdelrahman Salahadin, not only does myth merge with reality, but also reality itself (here Arabness) becomes too unstable to brook any prediscursive or operational locus of referentiality. (239)

More than fusing the two characters, it also suggests that the "found Arab," Hanif, only found himself when he immigrated and stepped outside his own culture. Hanif, in fact, only finds himself entirely when he drowns himself inside the U.S. culture and through his contact with Sirine. The professor has the courage to face and bury the traumatic memories of his life back in Iraq. By giving this end to the novel, Abu-Jaber clearly demonstrates that the journey of self-discovery is sometimes painful and demands a certain degree of autonomy to make decisions, as Han shows when he decides to return to his mother's house in Iraq, despite knowing he might be killed.

In conclusion, food is undoubtedly a key element for the analysis of Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. It is an artifact that brings together different ethnicities in the space of the café; it also functions as a spin board for both Sirine and Han to begin to negotiate their past memories; and serves as a trigger to her uncle's meaningful storytelling. And, as a result, the representation of food ends up being the ground for discussing political issues concerning the situation of Arab immigrants and their descendants in the United States.

2. Remembering Homes: Politics of Memory

> *Exile can produce rancor and regret, as well as a sharpened vision. What has been left behind may either be mourned, or it can be used to provide a different set of lenses. Since almost by definition exile and memory go together, it is what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it that determines how one sees the future.*
>
> *Edward Said (xxxv)*

> *Although one may think otherwise, the reason members of a group remain united, even after scattering and finding nothing in their new physical surroundings to recall home they have left, is that they think of the old home and its layout.*
>
> *Maurice Halbwachs (1)*

The representation of memory has become the focus of research in diverse fields of humanities such as philosophy, sociology, and literary studies. Each group of researchers tries to explain it employing different artifacts to understand how the phenomenology of memory operates. In *On Collective Memory*, a book that later would serve as a starting point to understand memory as a social phenomenon, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs exposes the thesis that the human memory is a cultural phenomenon and can only be recalled in a collective context as the individuals recollect what constitutes part of their experience exclusively if it is shared by a group. Memory, thus, changes and takes shape through the relationships individuals have with the spaces and the groups to which they belong.

Based on Halbwachs assumptions of memory as a social phenomenon, in *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton distinguishes three types of memory: personal, cognitive and habit memory, all of them being straightly connected to the human ability to recognize and make distinctions. Personal memory is the individual's immediate

capacity of remembering personal details of his or her life. Cognitive memory refers to the capacity of identifying things in an environment. It is the individual's capacity to hear a word and make a straight association with its meaning (24).

Habit-memory, according to Connerton, is the ability to remember every day actions such as waving goodbye, shaking hands, brushing the hair and teeth (24-25). As the author acknowledges, "the first two, personal and cognitive memory, have been studied in detail but by quite different methods, while the third, habit-memory, has for important reasons been largely ignored" (25). Because of that, he devotes attention to habit memory. According to him, in this kind of memory, the past is sedimented in the body (72) by two fundamentally different types of social practice: incorporating and inscribing practice. Connerton acknowledges that to understand social structures and identities it is necessary to examine human habits, thus bodily practices and rituals become highly relevant. He argues that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by ritual performance and that performative is bodily. In this perspective, collective and individual memory are interconnected, and these interconnections are so central to how societies reproduce their social order across generations, appropriate to analyze how societies remember (2).

German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, also based on Halbwachs' notion of the social aspect of memory, in the introduction to his book *Religion y Memoria Cultural*, has offered an analysis of two main verbs related to the collective and associative aspects of memory as a form of re-establishing a lost connection: remember and recollect. Assmann claims that when there is a great association among human beings, new shapes of memory and identity, common to many generations, will be established (28). Remembering and recollecting in a collective context, thus, not only grant the

establishment of different webs of connections among individuals, but also change the social relationships pre-established within that collective environment.

Connerton, in his turn, defines the verb to remember not as the capacity to recall isolated events, but rather "it is to become capable of becoming capable of forming meaningful narrative sequences" (35). In this perspective, groups are highly important as they will provide individuals the ground from which they recollect any given past event. According to Connerton, "groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised and memories are localised by a kind of mapping. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group." (37).

In his interpretation of Halbwachs theories, Connerton expands on the role of places and groups in the process of recollections. He ponders that

> we conserve our recollections by referring them to the material milieu that surrounds us. It is to our social spaces – those we occupy, which we frequently retrace with our steps, where we always have access, which at each moment we are capable of mentally reconstructing – that we must turn our attention, if our memories are to reappear. Our memories are located within the mental and material spaces of the group. (Connerton 37)

Sidonie Smith, in her turn, remarks that "remembering is a collective activity" (19). The very act of remembering within a group grants its members a better view of an event that has occurred and enables them to envisage new future possibilities. Smith also remarks that "memory is a means of 'passing on,' of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, in order to activate its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects. Thus, acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective" (2). In fact, as it is suggested, it is in the interior of a group that collective

memory takes shape, always leaning upon the memory of the group members in order to be validated. In this perspective, the relationship individuals have with spaces and the objects around plays a decisive role in the re-creation and evocation of their memories. The very act of recollecting is straightly connected to the spaces the individual occupies and these spaces take on an essential role as a reference to individuals to bring their past experiences into being.

As far as spaces are concerned, Halbwachs ponders that

> thus we understand why spatial images play so important a role in the collective memory. The place a group occupies is not like a blackboard, where one may write and erase figures at will. No image of a blackboard can recall what was once written there. The board could not care less what has been written on it before, and new figures may be freely added. But place and group have each received the imprint of the other. Therefore every phase of the group can be translated into spatial terms, and its residence is but the juncture of all these terms. Each aspect, each detail, of this place has a meaning intelligent only to members of the group, for each portion of its space corresponds to various and different aspects of the structure and life of their society, at least of what is most stable in it. (2)

In this perspective, places, spaces and objects become highly symbolic in rituals of remembering a lost past, especially for immigrants who find themselves in a different culture and have to negotiate with their memories in order to free themselves from nostalgic feeling of loss and uncertainty that permeate their lives.

In the article "Identities Under Siege: Immigration Stress and Social Mirroring Among the Children of Immigrants," Carola Suárez-Orozco contends that "by any measure immigration is one of the most stressful events a person can undergo" (195). Despite focusing on the psychological experiences of immigrants' children, Suárez-Orozco's general comments on immigration provides a better view of the situation of immigrants worldwide, but particularly in the United States. The critic sustains that

> [m]ost critically, immigration removes individuals from many of their relationships and predictable contexts – extended families and friends, community ties, jobs, living situations, customs, and (often) language. Immigrants are stripped of many of their sustaining social relationships, as well as their roles which provide them with culturally scripted notions of how they fit into the world. Without a sense of competence, control, and belonging, they may feel marginalized. *These changes are highly disorienting and nearly inevitable lead to a keen sense of loss*. (195, emphasis added)

As a result, some places become fragments, or to be more specific, they become traces of the old home and, to a certain extent; they mitigate their sensation of displacement. Smith remarks that "acts of remembering take place at particular sites and in particular circumstances" (18). In other words, not only places, but also objects incorporate the most intimate feelings, constituting one powerful tool for making memories flourish. As the act of remembering is a collective activity, as proposed by Halbwachs, places and objects, charged with symbolic meanings, take on the role of *sites of memories* (or places of memories as some would call), using Pierre Nora's term.

In his classical study, "Between Memory and History," Nora argues that memory and history are two completely different entities; he goes further to say that the

> 'acceleration of history' confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory – social and unviolated exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies – and history which is now our hopelessly forgetful modern society propelled by change organize the past. (8)

His description of memory as something "unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing" (Nora 8) is the focus of my research. Besides that, as he remarks, it appears in "permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting . . . a bond tying us to the eternal present . . . it nourishes recollections" (Nora 8-9). As he continues, "memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and, objects . . . it is absolute" (Nora 9).

For Nora, the sites of memories "mark the rituals of a society without ritual; integral particularities in a society that levels particularity; signs of a distinction of a group membership in a society that tends to recognize individuals only as identical and equal" (12). He ponders that

> [sites of memory] originate with this sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. (Nora 12)

In this way, Nora's remark echoes Priscilla Wathington's study inasmuch as the creation of an anchoring force of remembrance appears as a necessity for immigrants in

an alien culture, as most of them feel the necessity of leaning on traces of the old home in order to deal with the adversities of a new environment.

2.1. Recalling the Past: The Representation of Memory in *Crescent*

In *Crescen*t, Sirine's memories of her childhood exert a strong influence over her life since they arise mostly when she is in the café, especially in the back kitchen, preparing the recipes of the Arab dishes, and also through her contact with Hanif. In the case of Hanif, he carries the pain for being an exile and for having to deal with the loss of his home as well as of his identity, culture, and religion. In fact, he tries to forget his past, when he had to flee from Iraq during the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, and, more intimately, he has to deal with the death of his sister and the impossibility of returning to his homeland. For Hanif, home appears as something lost as he now lives under the condition of exile; it appears to him as a "mythic place and a place of no return" (192), using Avtar Brah's remark.

In an interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, when asked about the character Hanif, Abu-Jaber explained that Hanif's character is part of one of her "literary obsessions," which questions the painful experience of being in an immigrant condition. The painful experience she mentions is related to the very moment that a person leaves his or her country and is unsure about the future; Abu-Jaber concludes that it appears as an "incredible experience and journey . . . and for a lot of people it can be a real process of loss" (5).

Hanif is rather mysterious about his past and behaves in a way as if trying to push his traumatic past experiences out of his mind. His images of Iraq are randomly scattered in the past as he is haunted by the experience of having been forced to leave

his country as an exile. Hanif's drama is an individual one presented through the medium of fiction, but it becomes paradigmatic of other Iraqis and their emigration when Saddam Hussein's dictatorship is brought into the picture. Little by little, the professor reveals to Sirine his past, as the following passage demonstrates:

> "He's my younger brother", Han says slowly. "His name is Arif. I haven't seen him – or my parents, for that matter – in over twenty years. . . . I escaped to England not long after Saddam Hussein came to power. . . . He's almost ten years younger – he got the idea that I was some sort of daring revolutionary gone into exile. I wanted him to leave the country when he still had the chance, but he refused to go. He said he had his work," Han says, rolling his eyes. "He was arrested and imprisoned before his thirteenth birthday. That was twenty-one years ago. And I can't return to help him." (119)

His situation as an exile as well as his discourse is also permeated by a certain feeling of guilt for being responsible for his brother's arrest after his escape. After telling Sirine his situation, Hanif declares that there is absolutely no possibility of returning to Iraq because "Saddam's idea of mercy was of allowing them to apologize for escaping before having them executed" (120). For him, finding his brother alive would make a great difference in easing the responsibility and the feeling of loss he carried. As the narrator describes at the end of the chapter,

> Han ticks back his head – the sad, Arab gesture. The one her uncle has taught her means something like, aren't you listening? His expression seems a sort of surrender: the loss of a thing that he has already lost before. He looks away. (120)

Han's memories and the feeling of a double loss, as the quotation points out, determine the way he acts, allowing his past to shape his present to an extent he cannot control. In a certain way, his memories are strongly connected to political facts in Iraq; he tries to forget about his escape from Iraq, in 1980, when Saddam Hussein had declared war on Iran. This fact took place in an unstable political situation because the new party – the Ba'athist Party – was trying to control all aspects of their lives – from media to the arts to the schools – and Han's father was afraid of what could happen to him.

His experience as a refugee shaped his new way of living since he went to a private school in Cairo, where he learned the history of the West – American and British. He describes this process of assimilation he underwent as something he could not avoid: "[t]he school had British and American faculty, classes were conducted in English, and history classes were the history of the west, literature was the literature of America and Britain. I didn't question any of it" (230).

Saleem, a character in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children,* uses the metaphor of a "cinema screen" to discuss the idea of perception and perspectives. According to this metaphor, the further you move away from a screen, the better perception of the whole one has. The past seems to become clear now that it is seen from a distant point in the present. In Hanif's case, his flashbacks as well as his contact with Sirine take him twenty years back and this distance in time allows him to grasp his past, although it is put together by little fragments.

As I discuss later in this chapter, the professor's life is undercut by two kinds of memory – the memories of his childhood and the memories of exile. On the one hand, there is the personal memory linked to his childhood in Iraq, living with his family and helping his father in the fields, and the historical memory, on the other hand, made up of

the unstable political situation in his homeland. In relation to the two kinds of memories, Halbwachs observes that

> [t]he first would rely on the second, because the whole story of our lives is part of history in general. However, the second would naturally be much broader than the first. Yet, it can only represent the past in a summarized and schematized manner, while the memory of our life presents us a much more continuous and dense context.[10] (Halbwachs 55, my translation)

In this context of personal instability, *Crescent* goes beyond a romanticized story to show how different experiences of Arabs in the West are affected by a similar nostalgia for the lost homeland and the difficulty in belonging to the new environment, as Hanif's condition illustrates. Curiously, for Nathan, an American photographer, his memories are anchored back in Iraq where he meets Hanif's sister and falls in love with her. Despite being American, Nathan has more connections with the East than with the West. Because of this, he is aware of the political situation of that region; he knows the geographies of the places he has been to, besides knowing the names of the Arab poets and their poetry by heart. Moreover, the photographer nurtures an obsessive desire to photograph people – mainly Sirine and Hanif – in their moments of intimacy. It is in the back kitchen of Nadia's Café, watching Sirine stuff some grape leaves, that Nathan unveils his past.

Each of these characters deals differently with their memories and, for each one, the memories need different prosthetic devices to come into being. For the course of the story, Nadia's Café appears as a meaningful space since it is filled with the smell of the

[10] "a primeira se apoiaria na segunda, pois toda história de nossa vida faz parte da história em geral. Mas a segunda seria, naturalmente, bem mais ampla do que a primeira. Por outra parte, ela não nos representaria o passado senão sob uma forma resumida e esquemática, enquanto que a memória de nossa vida nos apresentaria um quadro bem mais contínuo e denso" (Halbwachs 55).

food cooked by Sirine, which is able to "cheer the Arab students up" (17); in addition, her act of preparing the food – especially *baklava* – is also a strong connector to the "old world" since it reminds Hanif of his family and his life back in Iraq. Besides that, her food works as bridge drawing closer the regular customers while they enjoy the afternoon conversations in the café.

In this way, the counter, the back kitchen and the other rooms in the café take on the role of a *site of memory*, to use Pierre Nora's term. As memory is a reconstruction of the past based on experiences of the present and through the relationships the individual has with the places he is inserted in, the act of eating the Arab food and the presence of the characters in the café constitutes a sort of "mnemonic ritual." Curiously, food serves to feed the characters involved in the story, as well as to "feed" and provoke past memories. Consequently, it also becomes a fragment of the old home – a site of memory. According to Nora, the sites of memory encompass places (museums, archives, and memorials), concepts, practices (celebrations and rituals), images, and symbolic objects. It is made up of symbolic traces which help to pass on memories through generations. Indeed, sites of memory assume the role of crystallizing the "collective memories," as proposed by Halbwachs, to create and reinforce identity.

As I argued in Chapter I, food unquestionably plays a major role in the novel, strongly influencing the characters' behaviors. It is worth noticing that photographs and other objects, especially the scarf – are just as significant insofar as they too operate a kind of return to the past, again making early experiences surface in the present and therefore constituting as well a site of memory. As the collective memory has an important role in shaping the feeling of belonging, this chapter aims at examining the relationship between sites of memory and the characters Hanif, Sirine, and Nathan.

For my analysis, I also rely on some passages in which the actions that take place in the café illustrate how it becomes a space of remembering and sharing intimacies. It is my contention that Nadia's Café undergoes a kind of gradation – passing from a public to a private sphere – and in both spheres the revelations and actions have a strong meaning for the course of the narrative.

2.2. The Café as a Site of Memory

> *The grill at work is so wide Sirine must stand on tiptoes to reach all the way to the back. There are bright pans hanging from an overhead rack and magnetic rows of gleaming knives. Her arms are dashed with red slivers of burns, and as she bends to scrape the grill surface she feels its smells passing into her hair and clothes. Even after a day off, she can still catch whiffs of it as she turns her head. There is a ruby haze beneath the heat lamp, vapors rising from the stove, and everywhere the murmurings of the fans.*
>
> *Diana Abu-Jaber (Crescent 17)*

A glance over the epigraph invites the reader to take part in the atmosphere which permeates Nadia's Café. Described as "Aladdin's Hidden Treasure", it is a special place, mainly for the Arab immigrants who go to the U.S. searching for opportunities – professional and personal. As described,

> At Nádia's Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soup operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned. . . .

> There are students who come religiously, appearing at the counter with their newspapers almost every day for years, until the day they graduate and disappear, never to be seen again. And then there are students who never graduate. (20)

In *Crescent*, for the Arab students, Nadia's Café works as the materialization of home, and, consequently, of memory. The food cooked by Sirine seems to have the effect of reminding the café's regular customers of their homelands. Fadda-Conrey also points to the importance of the café as a gathering place. She comments that

> Arab students, teachers, exiles, and immigrants flock to the café, which becomes for them the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture. In fact, the café also becomes the core of *Crescent*'s ethnic borderland, serving as the central locus of interethnic and intercultural interactions between Arabs, Arab Americans, Latinos and white Americans, among others. (5)

Abu-Jaber also observes that the cafés have the power of creating "their own cultural environment, their own micro cultures" (Shalal-Esa 5). Indeed, the café is attended by male customers, and, interestingly, they are the ones who seem to have a strong desire for forming bonds as a way of easing the feeling of invisibility they carry inside the American society. In this perspective, it reinforces the idea presented in Wathington's study, which clearly remarks that, for the new world food literature writers, "food is a means and expression of staying Arab in America" since it works as "the reconstruction of the old home in the new world" (72).

Seen from this perspective, Abu-Jaber clearly portrays this idea and deals with the café, akin to Sirine's food, as a strong metaphor of connection to the lost past; the

space of the café recalls their homelands and comforts the characters. Again, according to Wathington, it is important to question the way immigrants deal with the new environment and with the memories of the old home. Thus, food and the act of remembering a lost country in the café work as a "sort of comfort in an otherwise strange and foreign language" (Wathington 68-70).

It is in the café that Arab immigrants "spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine" (17). Um-Nadia, the café owner and the "all-around boss," points out that

> the loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing, it is all consuming. It is already present like a little shadow under the heart when he lays his head on his mother's lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he leaves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day. [And] that is the way Sirine suspects that Arabs feel everything – larger than life, feelings walking in the sky. (Abu-Jaber 19)

As a consequence, for the Arabs, the café becomes the re-creation of the Middle East in the West; besides that, the "Real True Arab Food," cooked by Sirine, is the bridge able to take them back to their old memories.

For this analysis, I am relying on the premise that the different spaces in the café – the tables, the counter, the first kitchen, the back kitchen, and the garden in the back – construct a single unity, giving the place the status of a meaningful site of memory, using again Pierre Nora's definition.

Curiously, in *Crescent*, not only the Arab and Latino immigrants, but also others such as the Italian waiter Eustavio from the Italian café, La Dolce Vita, share the same feeling of loneliness for being away from home. As the waiter declares, when "[w]e

[immigrants], leave our home, we fall in love with our sadness" (127). In fact, as the novel demonstrates, there is no escape from the past, since one's memories inhabit the very self and are thus from the self inseparable, and can be activated at anytime.

Despite not having been opened to make the regulars remember their lives back in their old homes, the café fits Nora's definition inasmuch as it is invested by a symbolic aura and becomes an object of a ritual, able to transmit values and traditions through generations. Nora ponders that

> *Lieux de memoire* [sites of memory] are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are *lieux* in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional. Even an apparently purely material site, like an archive, becomes a *lieu de me'moire only if the imagination invests it with a symbolic aura*. A purely functional site, like a classroom manual, a testament, or a veterans' reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual. (18-19, emphasis added)

The café is a locus for a kind of mnemonic ritual for Abu-Jaber's characters as it permits them to recall past experiences. It materializes memories through the manipulation of objects – such as newspapers, the TV set broadcasting the news from the East – besides the presence of Sirine's food, as discussed in Chapter I. As pointed out previously, it also takes on the status of a re-created home for the Arabs in the U.S. As a result, the café appears as the prosthetic device which "nourishes" the characters' recollections.

Sirine's presence in the kitchen softens the loneliness the regulars feel due to her kindness and her gentle voice. Besides that, "her food is so good that [they] cannot help themselves" as "they sit at tables, leaning toward her" (17). It is worth mentioning the reference to other ethnic workers: the Mexican busboy, Victor Hernandez; the Central American custodian, Cristóbal, and Um-Nadia's daughter Mireille. Interestingly, as Fadda-Conrey states, all the characters, including the minor ones, are carefully delineated and "their individual national differences negates simplistic representations of the Arab identity" (195). The representation of the café as a re-created homeland can be seen through the interesting analysis of the names of the characters from Egypt and Kuwait, when the critic comments that

> [t]he names of the Arab students from Egypt and Kuwait--Schmaal, Jenoob, Shark, and Gharb, which in Arabic mean North, South, East, and West, respectively--signify distinct geographical entities that can be interpreted as individualized characteristics challenging the reductive attributes the term Arab often generates. (195)

Because of the interethnic interaction the café provides, Nouri Gana sees the space as a reactivation of Andalusia, a place where Muslins and Jews lived in harmony, developing miraculous works of philosophy and architecture together. As Gana remarks, Nadia's Café is a

> mini Andalusia of Arabicate (rather than Islamicate) culture in operation. . . .The gatherings of exiles, immigrants, and the multiple ethnicities that Nadia's café hosted precipitated not only a counter-intuitive and tragically human(e) sense of Arabness, but also a number of intraethnic and interethnic

> alliances and identifications of profoundly empowering effects, even if of unresolved tensions, contraries, and differences. (243)

Thus, the attempt to break up with an essentialist view of Arabs in the novel, telling them apart from each other, is a strong tool for portraying the community struggle to refute stereotypes. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, in their turn, believe that the presence of such different characters coming from different backgrounds creates a domestic "contact zone," using Mary Louise Pratt's term, which is "situated in cafés, kitchens, and homes" (39). It becomes a site where characters, despite not sharing common origins, find in the language of food a means for communicating and expressing their feelings.

Sara Ahmed, in "Home and Away," argues that for the subject who lives under the condition of immigrant, the feeling of displacement one feels is a question of having to deal with shards of past memories. As she remarks, the very act of leaving a home and becoming an outsider in a strange culture leads to the creation of "a new community of strangers, a common bond with those others who have shared the experiences of living overseas" (Ahmed 84). She argues further that "the forming of a new community provides a sense of fixity through the language of heritage – a sense of inheriting a collective past by sharing the lack of a home rather than sharing a home" (Ahmed 84-85). For Avtar Brah, in the diasporic community "the identity is far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively" (183). In the final analysis, several critics seem to dedicate their studies precisely to that which readers experience fictionally in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*.

One issue I also want to address is that, besides the counter, where the café regulars enjoy Sirine's food, the back kitchen also has an important role to play in the

story. The counter stands for the public sphere of café, whereas the back kitchen is a private space where symbolic actions take place; more importantly, it stands for a kind of gradation of the café, going from a public sphere to a more intimate one.

The back kitchen, "full of shelves, cupboards, a giant refrigerator, a linoleum-topped table with wobbly pipe-metal legs and five vinyl-cracked chairs" (58), is the place where Sirine has intimate conversations with Um-Nadia regarding her uncertainty about Hanif. Intimately linked with Sirine's memories of her childhood, it is her "favorite place to sit at a table chopping carrots and thinking her thoughts" (58). Additionally, in that place "she can look out the window at the back courtyard and feel like she's a child again, working at her mother's table" (58). The quotations just cited reinforce the idea of the café becoming a powerful site of memory, for it takes Sirine back to her childhood, helping her mother to prepare *baklava*, as I discussed at length in Chapter I.

After all the customers have gone and the other workers are getting ready to leave, Sirine decides to stay to prepare in advance part of the dishes for the next day. Working only under the moonlight and the streetlights, the chef is "spreading small brined grape leaves, flat on the cutting board, slicing out the tiny stems, wrapping the star-spoked leaves, around rice and meal" (85). This is also the first occasion when she meditates over the ingredients and thinks about her first date with the professor.

For someone who never thought of herself as afraid of the dark, Sirine discovers that she is growing conscious of her fear of the dark; actually, it is not the absence of light that she fears, but rather, the kind of darkness, or mystery, that Hanif represents in her life. She also confides to Han that she can even "bicycle with her eyes closed," for her it is "easier to ride without the light" (74-75) because of her familiarity with the spaces. Han, however, stands for uncharted territory for her.

On the one hand, Sirine, despite being a hyphenated person, is strongly connected to the U.S. and the geography of the places around her. Ironically, the contact with the Iraqi professor symbolizes a contact with her dormant half. Han is a new geography that the chef is afraid of exploring. For the professor, on the other hand, the geography of the U.S. is something he does not get and for him "it seems like things keep swimming around" (75). He asserts that when he thinks that he knows the location of things, suddenly they are gone. (75)

Closely linked to the issue of orientation, seeing is strongly connected to a camera a photographer may use to capture images worth of recording. For the photographer Nathan, the moments he captures and immortalizes with his camera also make him remember his life in the Middle East, where he spent a couple of years to photograph the area. It is while preparing the *baklava* in the back kitchen that Sirine also gets to know Nathan's memories. The back kitchen, again, appears as the arena in which the reader witnesses the photographer's revelations about his stay in that region. It is observing the kindness of Sirine stuffing the grape leaves that he is taken back to the time when he lost his true love – Hanif's sister, Leila – in Iraq.

Similarly to the other passages, love and *baklava* are also connected in this episode. As Nathan reveals his feelings, Sirine immediately offers him some *baklava* left. The food and the privacy in the kitchen make him remember the one he loved and lost. He confesses that he "had always thought love made you feel light, but this was exactly the opposite. It was the heaviest thing" (Abu-Jaber 87). He felt so complete as if he had found the reason for his existence, his "true north", and his identity. He says that in that region he learned about families, something he missed because his parents divorced when he was at young age:

> I went into the Middle East without any idea of who I was – there was no needle on my compass, you know? But the people in Iraq – this sounds dumb and romantic – but the thing is, they really seemed to know who they were. They dressed the way their grandparents dressed, they ate the way they've eaten for hundreds of years. And they were so alive – I mean, lots of them didn't have TV or telephones, but everyone talked about politics, art, religion, you name it. They were living under dictatorship but their inner selves stayed *alive* – do you see? (87, author's emphasis)

The photographer continues telling Sirine about Leila, and, according to him, she "was like a *true north*" (88, author's emphasis). But, suddenly he resorts to the complicated political situation involving Iraq and the U.S.:

> Nathan lowers his face and replaces his glasses, hooking them around his ears. 'Oh. Well. There're always complications, aren't there? An Arab girl, a Muslim, an Iraqi. And an American, failed-Episcopalian boy.'
>
> [Sirine] begins trimming another grape leaf. 'That doesn't have to mean anything.'
>
> [Nathan replies]: 'maybe it doesn't. I don't know. But for us . . . it made everything so difficult – to be altogether.' (88)

His revelations lead Sirine to realize the painfulness of the photographer's memories, and she "wishes she knew how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn't sound frightened or awkward" (88), but, that very moment also reminds her of her own parents' death,

> when people would approach her and try to explain her loss to her; they said things that were supposed to cure her of her sadness, but they had no effect at all. And she knew then, even when she was nine years old, that there was no wise or consoling thing to say. There were only helpful kinds of silences, and some were better than others. (88-89)

In a certain way, Nathan's memories have a strong impact over Sirine's life as she makes associations with her own experience of the loss of her parents, a situation when there was no wise or consoling thing to say, just let time heal.

2.3. Photographs as Sites of Memory

> *A fotografia é este espelho diabólico que nos acena do passado.*
>
> *Boris Kossoy (42)*

> *_ Não se trata simplesmente de Bice – respondia. _ É uma questão de método. Qualquer pessoa que você resolva fotografar, ou qualquer coisa, você tem que continuar fotografando sempre, só ela, a todas as horas do dia e da noite. A fotografia só tem sentido se esgotar todas as possibilidades.*
>
> *Italo Calvino (63)*

In the short story by Italo Calvino entitled "A aventura de um fotógrafo," Antonino Paraggi is obsessed with photography for he sees in the act of photographing a way of possessing and immortalizing moments of his life. Therefore, Antonino untiringly photographs Bice, his model and companion, night and day, even without her knowing or authorizing it. When abandoned by Bice, Antonino, curiously, starts shooting the gap – the absence of his beloved – and saves all the pictures in an album.

At the end of the story, he becomes an anxious man when he is confronted with the impossibility of capturing a perfect shot.

Searching for the perfect frame, as Calvino shows, leads us to really conceive taking pictures as an imperative in contemporary society that increasingly feels the need to record every moment through the lenses of cameras. For Olga Rodrigues de Moraes von Simson, "with the democratization of the photos, more people had access to the cameras . . . the life of social groups and individuals began to be reported much more because of the image than of the memory books, letters or diaries, and the individual and familiar memory began to be constructed based on an imagistic support" (Von Simson 20, my translation). [11]

Photos have the power of acting as stored memories. They grant the return to a past that is no longer available, but that is stored to be rescued from our minds. They go beyond mere objects to supplement and transmit personal feelings and emotions that lie in a moment of a life that has been. Thus, they concede the construction of the past, being broadly associated with the collective and individual memory since they also work as tools in shaping the person's identity; they allow the mental reconstruction of a past.

The acceleration of life in large urban centers gives us the idea that we are overworking and, therefore, our free time should be fully enjoyed. So, individuals usually enjoy their little time with family and friends. The very act of photographing at parties, family reunions, baptisms and other special occasions shows that there is a concern for modern individuals so as not to lose and forget moments they deem important.

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[11] "com a democratização das fotografias, um número maior de pessoas teve acesso às máquinas fotográficas. . . a vida dos grupos sociais e dos indivíduos passou a ser registrada muito mais pela imagem do que pelos livros de memórias, cartas ou diários, e a memória individual e familiar passou a ser construída tendo por base o suporte imagético" (Von Simson 20).

It is indeed true that the easiness in constructing photographic archives nowadays gives us the false impression that we can freeze time and recall memories experienced in a time that no longer returns. Thus, as von Simson warns, the role of photography in these situations just comes down to "trigger the process of recollection" (Von Simson 20, my translation)[12] so that individuals can "build a vision of the events already experienced" (Von Simson 20, my translation). [13] By means of photographs people recognize old friends, colleagues and beloved ones. Besides that, photographs grant individuals the possibility of mentally reconstructing a place lost in time through the manipulation of fragments of the past.

By triggering the process of remembering, photographs enable us to reconnect our present to our past in a split second, and give individuals a sense of selfhood. As Miriam Lifchitz Moreira Leite states, photographs "allow productive associations and evocations of other images stored in memory. By examining a photograph, each observer connects it with oneself, always trying to discern what they could not realize without that image" (Leite 37, my translation). [14] Boris Kossoy, in his turn, sees photographs as a "rich source of information for the reconstruction of the past as much as a matter for the construction of fiction" (Kossoy 40, my translation) [15] because they enable us to make several interpretations of the content they present.

In her book *Sobre Fotografia*, Susan Sontag contends that photos allow us to prove the existence of something we may have heard about, but that becomes true only when we visualize the photos (15). Sontag also ponders that "through photographs, each family builds a visual chronicle of itself – a portable set of images that gives testimony

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[12] "detonar o processo de rememoração" (Von Simson 20).
[13] "construir uma visão sobre os acontecimentos já vividos" (Von Simson 20).
[14] "permitem associações e evocações produtivas de outras imagens armazenadas na memória. Ao examinar uma fotografia, cada observador acaba sempre relacionando-a consigo, procurando discernir em si mesmo o que talvez não percebesse sem a visão daquela imagem" (Leite 37).
[15] "rica fonte de informação para reconstituição do passado tanto quanto uma matéria para a construção de ficção" (Kossoy 40)

to its cohesion" (Sontag 19, my translation).[16] Different values and meanings will be attributed to the photos throughout the times. Indeed, they give individuals a feeling of identification with a certain social grouping, reinforcing his or her sense of belonging to the collectivity formed within his group.

In *Crescent*, photographs are also of great importance, since they operate a kind of return to the past, once again, making previous experiences emerge for the characters. It is worth emphasizing that each character responds differently to the photographs. Like Antonino, the character in Calvino's story, Nathan too behaves compulsively and seems to try to possess a little bit of everything he sees through the lenses of his camera – mostly places and people connected to the Arab world. Nathan's compulsive behavior translates his desire of participating in people's lives, as Sontag remarks,

> [e]ven if it conflicts with the intervention, a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation. Despite the camera being an observation post, the act of photographing is more than just a passive observation. . . . taking a picture is to have interest in the things as they are, by keeping the *status quo*. . . is to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting and worthy of being photographed – even when, that is the point of interest, with the pain and misery of other people. (22-23, my translation) [17]

[16] "Por meio das fotos, cada família constrói uma crônica visual de si mesma – um conjunto portátil de imagens que dá testemunho da sua coesão." (Sontag 19)

[17] "Mesmo que incompatível com a intervenção, num sentindo físico, usar uma câmera é ainda uma forma de participação. Embora a câmera seja um posto de observação, o ato de fotografar é mais do que uma observação passiva. . . . tirar uma foto é ter interesse pelas coisas como elas são, pela permanência do *status quo*, . . . é estar em cumplicidade com o que quer que torne um tema interessante e digno de se fotografar – até mesmo, quando for esse o foco de interesse, com a dor e a desgraça de outra pessoa" (Sontag 22-23).

Nathan's first exhibition entitled *Photography Against Art: Real Scenes by Nathan Green* shows people in different emotional states and the photos are described as "disturbing yet graceful, filled with languid shadows, as if the photographer were shooting through surfaces" (32). In a first glance, the photos seem to captivate Sirine, but as she views other pictures, the chef seems to be disturbed, because the pictures seem to remind her of a dream from which she could not wake up, as the following passage shows:

> the photos bother Sirine: they remind her of times she's known she was dreaming and couldn't wake herself up. She gazes at one particularly dark image: something that looks like a well of light, a person in its center, head tilted back, staring straight up at the camera. The image slips inside her, cold, like swallowed tears. (33)

In one of many gatherings in the café, customers are enjoying the table talk and among them is Nathan. The photographer demonstrates an unusual desire to belong to Arab culture. Indeed, his photos work powerful tools for the materialization of his desire to be part of that environment of communion that Nadia's Café generates. In his travels to Iraq, he is constantly taking pictures of the places and the people of the villages he visited. Khoorosh, the grocer at Victory Market, thinks the photographer is a little disturbed, because he goes to the market to photograph almost everything he sees. As the grocer says: "He is one of these types, likes to argue, asks a million opinions – how do I feel about this president, the dictator, Shah versus Ayatollah, Iranian Jews, Iraqi Jews, Palestinian Christians, Muslims in Hollywood" (136). Besides being interested in partaking in that commonality created at Nadia's Café, the photographer is also aware of the unstable political scenario of the Middle East.

Nathan and Sirine are together at the café looking at the photos of his travels throughout Iraq, when Hanif arrives at the place. This moment brings up an interesting analysis of the place and it is revealing how each photograph touches in a similar manner the individuals involved in the situation and seems to bring them closer. Both Hanif and Nathan recollect the same place:

> Han shuffles through more prints and stops on one of the mountains filled with folding cloud shadows. "Here", he says. "This landscape? He shows it to Sirine. I love this place."
>
> Nathan nods. "Oh, the marsh Valley."
>
> "My father has family there. We used to go visit them in the spring. I can almost smell it," Han says. "The air smells like dry caves and roasting weeds and bones." (134)

Little by little, due to the power of pictures in recollecting memories, readers begin to witness the development of a bond – a kind of identification – with those people who had the same experiences. Hanif and Nathan see themselves in a moment of sharing memories of early experiences.

To Sirine, differently, the photos are part of a geography she is unaware of, despite the fact that her father was born there. Just like the photos in Nathan's exhibition awoke a concern in Sirine, a picture found in Hanif's flat also has significant meaning for her. It is a picture of Han with his sister and brother in Iraq, and the complicity between them noticeable in the photo arouses a feeling of jealousy in Sirine. Her contact with Hanif intrigues her and makes her look for answers to some of her concerns about the attraction she feels for the professor. Thus his connection with Iraq as well as his exile condition touches the chef in a deep manner to the point that it leads her to seek, in an old family album, fragments of her past that may help her to find

answers to her uncertainties. After talking to Han, when she comes home, Sirine looks for an old photo album and decides to take it with her to the little Italian café located a few blocks from her apartment.

It is important to highlight that the photo album Sirine picked up, besides storing bits of crystallized past, also serves as a reliquary:

> Tucked between the pages are pressed flowers petals, old letters, a crayon drawing that Sirine made in first grade of her mother, father, and uncle all holding hands, their hair colored in carrot-orange and their eyes all sea-green. The stiff album pages are covered with black pasted-in corners that anchor the edges of the photographs. The photos are black and white, and Sirine's parents are skinny, grinning like kids. (125)

Among them, there are pictures of her parents in various occasions, her uncle and their unknown friends whose names the chef regrets not remembering. Humorously, her uncle suggests that it should be called "midnight photo album" due to Sirine's nostalgia while browsing through the pictures.

Gail de Vos considers photographs as an excellent catalyst for family stories. De Vos remarks that

> When we look at our parent's early photographs, we are intrigued by the images of people we know and those we don't, as well as places that our parents used to visit. . . . One story will remind the teller of related instances, and soon countless tales and snippets of memory are brought to light. Since photographs are not a random sampling of our past but rather a series of

> selected frozen images, they also tell the story of impressions of ourselves. (45)

Indeed, when family stories are told by the very use of photographs, it helps children, in this case Sirine, to have a better notion of their own identity. As De Vos remarks, "[f]amily stories give children not only a sense of identity, but also a connection to their heritage. Children love to hear stories of their parents when they were young. What we did and how we behaved are of particular interest" (49). In this way, photographs provide flashes of the past, so that they strengthen children and parents' relationships. Analyzing the photographs leads Sirine to tell her uncle about Hanif's situation and question him about the origin of her family in Iraq. But for her uncle, talking about his past in that country is also very painful, because the Iraq where he and her father lived no longer exists. Thus, it's a new, scary place. As the following passages exemplifies:

> "Han's brother was arrested and he's still in prison," Sirine blurts out. "Han says he can never go back again" . . . her uncle stares at her, closes his eyes. Finally he rubs his fingertips over his eyes. "Oh no. Terrible. Yes, now, that, you see – that place is a different Iraq you're talking about. Different from the one that I and your father grew up in. I'm so sorry for Han." (127)

Sirine's relationship with the photographs seems to strengthen as her friendship with Nathan grows closer. To Sirine's surprise, Nathan gives her a picture of her and Hanif taken when they first met during a poetry recital when she was unaware of being photographed. In the photo, Sirine and the professor are a few inches from each other. The perfection of the framework of the picture dazzles Sirine. In that moment, Nathan

admits that he does not ask for permission to take the photos. Nathan's obsession, in fact, stands for a true predatory act, using Sontag's words. According to Sontag,

> there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. Photographing people is violating them, seeing them as they never see each other, having a knowledge of them they can never have; transform people in objects that can be symbolically possessed." (Sontag 25, my translation) [18]

Sirine confesses to Nathan that those photos take hold of her as a spirit takes hold of someone. As in one of the passages in the café shows, Nathan confesses to Sirine about his life in Iraq. He confides to her that he had stopped shooting when he believed to have found the true north of his compass – Leila.

Nathan's second exhibition has a greater impact not only over Hanif, but also it touches the other characters differently: showing astonishment and revulsion at the same time. As described, the exhibition is taking place in old church, without any sophisticated decoration: "there's a series of matted black and white photographs on the wall" (251).

Some observers think the photos are lovely and different, "very unusual and artistic-looking" (251). Um-Nadia does not seem to sympathize with the photos though; she says: "this is bad news. No improvements at all! I don't know what can be done" (251). Sirine, on the other hand, "likes the photos very much;" for her,

> they're perverse and revealing and even a little pretty. The first shots seem to be of food – rows of crinkling onions at a stand, some people holding up a massive watermelon, and the back of

[18] "Ainda assim, existe algo predatório no ato de tirar uma foto. Fotografar pessoas é violá-las, ao vê-las como elas nunca se vêem, ao ter delas um conhecimento que elas nunca podem ter; transforma as pessoas em objetos que podem ser simbolicamente possuídos" (Sontag 25).

> a woman's head and shoulders as she bends over a bushel of walnuts at what looks like a street fair or farmer's market. (251)

Hanif, however, is interested in the pictures of people, which he defines as "odd." The pictures shock the professor as he gazes them in more detail. In fact, those individuals photographed seem to be afraid of the camera, as if it were controlling their actions. As the narrator describes,

> the images aren't at all charming: the animals look matted and filthy; one cat seems to be missing an ear. There are many photographs of adults as well: a woman with bruised-looking eyes leans intently toward the camera; an elderly woman lifts one hand. There are no horns, mysterious fish tails, or floating smiles – but there is something disturbing in the mood of the shots, an ingrained murkiness, rolls of smoke on the horizon, descending from the sky. The faces look wan and starved, the cheeks sunken, eyes like black marbles. All of them peering out as if gazing through the print at the world. As if knowing the onlooker, in some more comfortable place, could sense her complicity as she stared back. (252)

The pictures, once meant to arrest visitor's attention, end up shocking them. On the one hand, Han is the only one familiar with the people photographed and seems to be able to read their faces and their inner feelings. Nathan, on the other hand, explains that the exhibition is a celebration of his stay in Iraq. He also talks about Iraqi's hospitality. He says:

> They invited me right into their homes. We supped tea and talked all day long. Maybe to you [visitors] that sounds boring,

> but, to me, I felt like I'd finally found something real. Like I'd regained my senses. I ended up taking pictures of a really beautiful world. A very, very lovely and complete place. (253)

What for Nathan is to be a celebration, in fact, becomes something uncanny, in the strict sense of the word. Sirine examines the pictures trying to know the setting where they were taken. The chef also "notices that the other people in the room seem to bend and look closely at the images, then quickly step back. The murmuring gets louder; people look unsettled" (253). As Nathan tells Sirine's uncle, the photos are to be a kind of protest against the way Americans face things outside their country.

As photos work as catalysts of memory, Hanif's past is brought to him by means of Nathan's photos. The more the professor tries to live quietly in the U.S., the more his past becomes present in his life, with images of his childhood surrounding him as ghosts. A picture of his cousin Lamia torments him to an extent he cannot control. The passage in question raises an interesting discussion on the very aspect of photographing as being outlaw. The professor is bothered by the pictures as he knows those people would never agree to be exposed publically:

> Han is standing in front of another photograph of a young woman; she has a shawl that lifts from her shoulders like raven and sky above her is the color of bone. He turns from the photo and says quietly, "where did you get these?"
>
> "Well I – I want them to be universal, you se, not just limited to –" [Nathan explains].
>
> "None of these people gave you permission, did they?"

> There's an edge in his voice [Han's]. "Just like all your photographs – you just shot them without asking, didn't you?" (254)

The photos turn into Hanif's martyrdom as he strongly disapproves them for showing people from his surroundings and for violating their privacy. He gives vent to his disgust:

> "This is an absolute violation, Han says loudly enough so several people look up. Sirine wants to touch his shoulder but she's afraid. "It's a violation of her privacy [his cousin] and it's a violation of my family's privacy. I don't know what you hoped to accomplish by doing this. I don't know if thought this was clever – some sort of practical joke –" (254)

To a certain extent, Han's outburst echoes Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, when she claims that "the photographers' intention do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own carrier blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it" (39). Nathan has the false impression of celebrating a culture he claims for himself as an example of beauty. However, the photos show quite the opposite. His admiration is in fact mixed with the disapproval of those viewers, especially Han and Sirine. Han seems to have no defense against the shocking content of the photos.

Sontag remarks that our sense of familiarity when in contact with some photos creates an immediate "sense of the present and immediate past" (*Regarding* 85). Adding to that, as she claims, "photographs lay down routes of reference and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan" (*Regarding* 85). As a result, the photos become powerful sites

of memory as they have symbolic and sentimental meanings for Sirine, Nathan, and ever more so to Han, who still longs for his home and the pictures seem to accentuate his homesickness.

2.4. The Scarf as a Site of Memory

As I sought to demonstrate in the previous section, Nathan's photos arouse different feelings in the characters. If, on the one hand, the pictures are considered outlaw and disturbing for Han, for Nathan, on the other hand, they comfort him as he is proud of his adventures in Iraq. His experiences in that country somehow shape his life back in the U.S. as he witnessed a communion among those people who, even living under a dictatorial regime, seemed to have hope for a better life, as he tells Sirine.

Nathan's memories of Leila come up when he sees Sirine wearing a scarf that belonged to her. Like the photographs, the scarf becomes an object charged with symbolic meanings as the photographer confesses all the truth about Leila's death in Iraq after seeing it.

The scarf was sent to Han by his aunt as a memento of his sister when he was still living in England. After telling Sirine about the object and some prayer beads, the professor insists that she accept the scarf saying that it belonged to his mother:

> He slides the shirt off her shoulders, then opens the veil and slowly drapes it across her recycling body; the silk floats over her skin. It is about four feet by four feet, black with faint shifting tones of gray and rose, embroidered along the borders with a precise, intricate design that makes her think of her red berries. "This is the traditional pattern of my mother's village in

> the south. All the villages have their own design. If you study them, you can figure out where a certain embroidery stitch has come from." He hands it to her. "She used to wear it over her hair." (143)

Sirine resists accepting the object as if not feeling comfortable enough to take such responsibility. Deep inside "she wants the scarf but there is also something about it, a vague sense warning her away. 'It's your only memento,' she protests" (143). Han tries to convince her to take the object, explaining the connection between the scarf and the day his parents fell in love: "'look at you, just look. It was made for you. It's necessary that you keep it.' He ties two corners together. 'My mother was wearing this when my father fell in love with her'" (143).

The scarf not only carries Hanif's memories of his family, but it is also an object that instigates him to think about his life in Iraq and his feelings towards being away for such a long time without having contact with them. Han ponders a little, but ends up revealing to Sirine his sentiments of hope for having his family safe living under Hussein's regime. He confesses he misses them:

> he studies her, his expression quiet and contemplative. "I do and I don't. It's hard to get information from Iraq, so few letters get through, and the ones that do are usually so heavily censored that they don't make much sense. I suppose my brother is still in prison and I hope that he and my mother are still alive. But I have no way of telling for sure. And there's no way for me to know if I'll ever see them again." He pauses. "I always think about them." (143-44)

When Sirine asks about Leila, Han changes the subject quickly, avoiding the painfulness of those memories and also disconcerted for the question and the emotional significance of that moment. Sirine and Han exchange confidences about their pasts:

> She tells him about her parents' job as relief workers. How they were often away from home, always in the worst places, the most dangerous war-torn, ruined. She tells about her father's belief that most of the world's greatest contemporary problems could be traced to the American obsession with commerce, and her mother's certainty that Americans were just devoted to nature, religion, friends, and family as the Arabs were. (144)

Sirine's memories are also painful and she even compares her experience with crossing the desert as Han did when escaping to Egypt. In fact, she is also bothered for having been raised by her uncle without the presence of her parents. She declares how the images of her parents were fading little by little from her memories. She confesses that

> I even stopped feeling excited when my parents came home. I tried not to show it, but I can remember when I started not waiting to go to my parent's house when they came back. They'd be gone, sometimes a month, sometimes more – which is forever to a kid. After a while I felt like I barely knew who they were. They were these adults who seemed to think I was supposed to love them. (145)

The scarf leads the characters to unveil their past. The significance of the object is also demonstrated in the novel during the Thanksgiving dinner, when Sirine plans "to wear it for dramatic effect while bringing in Victor's pumpkin pies" (198).While she is in the kitchen of her apartment Nathan arrives and is astonished when he sees the scarf on her.

He is disconcerted as the object revives his memories of Iraq: "He stops suddenly, moves closer, his head slightly canted to one side. 'What's that?' 'This?' Sirine opens her hands so a swath of material bells out, reveals the delicate berry-colored stitches. 'My scarf.'" (198-99)

The chef explains to him the origin of the scarf, but, actually, Nathan is aware of all the truth behind it. He avoids the scarf as if it were something poisonous. He knows it belonged to Leila, and this fact takes hold of him to an extent he cannot control:

> 'Oh,' Nathan says in a voice that is barely audible.
>
> Sirine says, 'It's very old. It belonged to Han's mother.'
>
> Nathan's face darkens. He doesn't speak for a moment but just stares at her and the scarf. And then, he says, unsteadily, 'He told you that?' he doesn't say anything more but simply stands there for another moment. Sirine slips the scarf from her shoulders. She opens her mouth, but Nathan says, 'I – can't – I – forgive me. I'm sorry,' and quickly leaves the room. (199)

After the dinner Sirine realizes she lost the scarf. She cannot remember where she last put it and this makes her really worried thinking about Han's reaction when he finds out she lost it. It is interesting to notice that Nathan goes to the café for "some baklava and coffee," but unusually, "he doesn't have his camera with him" (207). This passage is truly revealing because now that the photographer has the scarf he has a piece of Leila again. He does not have to take pictures compulsively: "he looks hangover and some how wrung out, his eyes hollow with fatigue, and he doesn't have his camera with him. He apologizes for leaving dinner so suddenly but says he was suffering from a terrible headache" (207). Um-Nadia even asks him about the scarf and he pretends to have nothing to do with its disappearance.

Han only misses the scarf during Nathan's second exhibition, just discussed in the previous section and, in that moment, he is tormented by the photos of his relatives back in Iraq and his rage is accentuated when Sirine tries to calm him down and he suddenly explodes with her. He regrets trusting her with such a meaningful object; besides that, he calls himself a fool for giving her the only memento he has of his sister.

As once the professor defined, exile is "bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country was like – I don't know – like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part – I'm haunted by myself" (162). Besides that, he tries to explain it to Sirine:

> 'Exile is like a dim, gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there's nothing real or actual inside of it. You're constantly thinking that you see old friends on the street – or old enemies that make you shout out in your dreams. You go up to people, certain that they're members of your family, and when you get closer their faces melt away into local strangers. Or sometimes you just forget this is America, not Iraq. Everything that you were – every sight, sound, taste, memory, all of that has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew.' (162)

Han's comments echo Edward Said's reflections on exile as a condition of loss. Said claims that "the pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidarity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of question" (179). Like the photographs, the scarf mitigates Han's homesickness to an extent he decides to return to Iraq taking all the risks the country now represents for those who escaped during the first years of dictatorship, contradicting Said's comments about the impossibility of homecoming in

the quotation above. In fact, the professor has to definitely bury the ghosts of his tormented life. He needs to see his family again so as to feel comfortable with himself again.

Adding to that, just after he goes back to Iraq, Sirine finds the scarf again in Nathan's apartment, among some photos. Interestingly enough, she just recognizes the object because of Hanif's scent still impregnated in it. After such surprise, Nathan tries to apologize saying he would return it to her, but he did not know how. Sirine asks the reason why he took the scarf and, in that moment, the photographer unveils the truth behind the object and the significance of it for him. Nathan tells Sirine that it belonged to Leila and he tells her about their love and the way he was treated in Iraq at Han's house.

The scarf again works as a catalyst to bring Nathan's past memories to the present. He tells her about his life back in the Arab country and ends up confessing he was the real reason for Leila being arrested and killed afterwards. The photographer states:

> 'It's been so painful to live with these secrets,' he says. 'You have to understand. I never realized that Han held himself responsible for Leila's death. I should have guessed it, I suppose. They say that for some people, the guilt of surviving the people they love is worse than death itself. At this time, I kept quiet about what really happened – I thought of that as my own punishment. To live like this – shut away from everything, and to never, never tell anyone what happened. I couldn't stand the shame of it. I couldn't stand myself. I thought of killing

> myself but living seemed a better punishment. I'm responsible for Leila's death. My carelessness drew the police to her.' (334)

Just like Hanif, Nathan is haunted by memories of Iraq, especially those related to the political instability of the country. As self-punishment, he decides to live with the guilt of being responsible for the death of his beloved one.

In conclusion, in *Crescent*, memory appears as a cultural phenomenon, since the immigrant characters can only recall what constitutes part of their experience in a collective context only if it is shared by a group. It is not surprising; therefore, that an immigrant community is the ideal collective 'environment' for the development of memory, and, more often than not, the collectivity expresses the predicament of being invisible inside the host culture. In this perspective, Sirine's food has a power that transcends the anthropological values to become a bridge that connects to their lost homelands. Memory – the memory of their homelands – plays an important role in easing the feeling of displacement and uncertainty about their future in a host country.

Conclusion

> *Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.*
> *Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825)*

It was my intention to analyze the politics of food and memory in *Crescent*. It was my main contention that food in the novel works as a kind of ethnic bonding agent, able to bring different ethnicities together in the space of Nadia's Café. Besides that, the chef Sirine and especially the food she cooks played a central role in the novel for enabling the interaction among the different ethnic characters.

First of all, I saw the necessity of examining the possible uses of food both in social and literary studies to understand how it comes into play. To my surprise, I could see that it acquires different meanings in the distinct literary works analyzed as it serves not only to literally feed the characters, but it also triggers and nurtures their inner memories.

In *Crescent*, food is indeed a form of participation through which the immigrant characters long for home and for acceptance in the new environment. Eating traditional food from their homelands seems to compensate for their adverse situations. Seen from this perspective, I concluded that food acquires the role of a site of memory, for it enables the characters – Arab immigrants and non-Arabs – to make associations to places or lived experiences. Smell and tastes of the Arab food – *knaffea*, *baklava*, and the *tabbouleh* salad – permeate the novel and have the power of instigating their feelings. Besides the different forms of memories depicted in the novel, I verified that culinary memory, as I dare to call it, arises as a strong medium to discuss belonging and ethnic identity.

If memory, by broad definition, refers to the mental faculty of retaining and recalling past experiences, culinary memory is the one that arises when eating a specific kind of food. In other words, some memorable dishes savored in specific situations can also give birth to memory. In the context of *Crescent*, culinary memory is strongly connected to the kitchens, in this case, not only the kitchens of Nadia's Café, but also the ones in Sirine's and Hanif's homes.

Because of that, analyzing the role of kitchens in the novel became highly important for my research, as they offered the ground on which characters make revelations. The vivid tastes of childhood dishes that permeate these spaces seemed to encourage the characters to unveil their past. Indeed, they contribute to the richness of

Abu-Jaber's novel as food is not only a simple marker of ethnicity, but it is a strong metaphor of love, and a common language between the different ethnicities.

To confirm the relevance of kitchens for the novel, I refer back to Sirine's uncle when telling his moralless tale. He ponders that

> it's a lesser-known fact about jinns that, while they do not have living rooms or dinning rooms or studies or bathrooms or even very comfortable beds, they do like a nice kitchen, to satisfy their tooth, maybe bake a little knaffea, brew a little coffee, have a few people over–that sort of thing. (172)

Strongly considered as a female space, or as Bardenstein remarks, a "traditional female cultural sphere," the kitchens in the novel surpass ordinary assumptions to acquire the status of a site of memory, not only foregrounding revelations, but also becoming the stage on which the character Sirine enacts her Iraqi identity while maintaining the tradition of cooking the Arab dishes, inherited from her father. The warmth and comfort of the café's kitchen transport her back to her childhood memories trying to partake in the moments when her parents cooked together in their kitchen. As Bardenstein contends, the kitchen is a traditional site for passing on food knowledge (363). Besides that, it is interesting to notice that food knowledge is usually transmitted from mother to daughter. In *Crescent*, however, it is Sirine's father the one who instigated her to go deeper in the mysteries of the Arab cuisine and this fact allows her to exert Iraqi dormant self.

Based on these assumptions, a brief analysis of the cover of the novel gains relevance. The cover of 1st edition[19] shows a woman in a kitchen, with her back turned to those waiting to savor the food or just observing her kindness while she cooks, as it

[19] See appendix number 1.

suggests. In my view, the cover is really appealing as, supposedly, the woman holding the lid and mixing the ingredients stands for Sirine. Moreover, the cover reinforces the importance of cooking for the narrative, foregrounding the content of the novel. Indeed, it confirms my contention of Sirine's pivotal significance as an ethnic bonding agent as the woman's position in the cover reproduces exactly her position when she cooks with her back turned to the regulars who wait hungrily and anxiously to taste a little bit of their homelands.

As my research proceeded, I realized that the connection between food and storytelling is another revealing aspect of *Crescent*. This fact not only opened possibilities for the analysis of food, but it also confirmed my impressions of the existence of a web of relationships in the novel and in which food figures as a common element. Whenever Sirine's uncle is to tell part of his tale, Sirine offers him some food. This led me to conclude that food in this specific situation, not only feeds her uncle, but works as a kind of fuel to feed his mind to fabricate his tale.

Besides that, the frame story told by the uncle puts the limits of reality and fantasy into question, for, at the end of the main story, Hanif and Abdel become one single character. In this perspective, *Crescent* shows how the boundaries between reality and fantasy are fluid. Adding to that, the frame tale also provides the ground for the discussion of political and identity issues, as I discussed in Chapter II.

Another significant aspect of the novel I could not go without mentioning is the strong connection between food and orientation. As I could conclude, Sirine and Hanif are hungry for love and directions. On the one hand, she wants to understand her cultural roots, the ones related to her Iraqi inheritance. Adding to that, she is a defying character as she looks more American in her appearance and her way behaving. Her Iraqi roots are more related to the recipes she cooks; in fact, it is when she is cooking

that she feels her connection with that region more deeply. Han, on the other hand, is strongly affected by his exile condition. He still misses his homeland and fears the dictator's attitude towards those who escaped from the country and dare to return. Hanif envisages a new future in the U.S. and seems to be looking for a north to guide him throughout his path. Viewed under this light, Sirine and her food seem to comfort him to the extent that he unveils his fear and frustrations towards being an exile. At the same time, Sirine becomes a comfort zone for him, a place where his feelings of displacement seem to soften when he is with her.

Moreover, food arises as a transformative force of the relations between the immigrants, creating a community of strangers who find in the café an appropriate space for interactions. To understand the formation and existence of such diverse relationship, the term ethnicity and its implications served as the basis from which I could rely on and reach my conclusions.

In *Teorias da Etnicidade*, Philippe Poutignat states that ethnicity is a phenomenon universally present in modern times as it is a product derived from the economic development and the growth of the capitalist system (27). "Ethnicity," he defines, "is one of the characteristics that modify the social system and are modified by it and the other characteristics are age, gender, and religion" (Poutignat 22, my translation)[20]. Poutignat also observes that, for other critics such as Wallerstein, the term ethnicity is used to define not the ethnic belonging but the feelings associated to it such as the sense of *peoplehood* and the feeling of *loyalty* (24 emphasis added).

Furthermore, the development of new ways of communication and new forms of social interaction reinforced the feeling of belonging to a certain group. Based on an article by Connor, Poutignat observes that

[20] "Etnicidade como uma das características que modificam o sistema social e são modificadas por ele, e as outras características são idade, o sexo e a religião" (Poutignat 22).

> the considerable increase in contact among groups was seen by a significant number of people as a threat against the survival of their specific cultural traditions, favoring an ideology of resistance to the standardization or the cultural and linguistic dominance. (Poutignat 28, translation mine)[21]

The fast way in which groups relate to each other, as a result of the easiness of communication, permits the conjugations of feelings of national belonging and group identity. Ethnic groups transform and are transformed by the effects of transnational movements; consequently, cultural identities are shaped and reshaped over and over.

As Poutignat claims, the discussion of ethnicity as a cultural phenomenon of attraction and repulsion among groups should also be followed by a discussion of the term race. For Vacher de Lapouge, responsible for first introducing the term ethnicity in the social studies, race refers to the set of individuals who share common hereditary traces (33). Indeed, as Poutignat acknowledges, Vacher de Lapouge "invents" the term ethnicity as a way of preventing its misuses, as, on the one hand, race is identified as the association of the morphologic features and psychological traits (33). Ethnicity, on the other hand, relates to the grouping of people connected by elements such as culture or language (34). Thus, the term ethnicity is introduced into the social sciences to describe group solidarity and its social organization.

Based on these discussions of ethnicity, how can the ethnic groups be defined? This question really bothered me through the course of this research as the diversity of customer's backgrounds – Arab immigrants, exiles, and Americans – seemed to create a neutral space of communion, or a "contact zone," as Mary Louise Pratt's calls it.

Max Weber, in the article "Ethnic Groups," defines ethnic groups as

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[21] "o aumento considerável dos contatos intergrupais foi percebido por um significativo número de indivíduos como uma ameaça contra a sobrevivência de suas tradições culturais especificas favorecendo uma ideologia de resistência à uniformização ou à dominação cultural e linguistica" (Poutignat 28).

> those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. (56)

In this perspective, ethnic groups are only formed when the feeling of belonging to a community exists among the members of the group. As Poutignat remarks, the ethnic identity is built upon the differences and changes through the materiality of everyday life. Different levels of social organization such as class and gender and different environments create a new form of ethnicity. In this way, language, space, common habits, and the consciousness of belonging to the same group figure as key elements to bring those members together in the belief that a common past or history could be shared and re-created.

Adding to that, after such definitions, I dare to say that, for the ethnic group depicted in Abu-Jaber's novel, food and the space of Nadia's Café become the facilitator of all the relationships. Despite not sharing the same homeland, the very fact of coming from the Middle East serves as a common denominator that nurtures the characters' feelings of solidarity and community for living under the same predicament of being Arab in the U.S. As a conclusion, the feeling of estrangement for the new environment forms a fictional ethnic community united by the very notion of sharing a common language – the language of Sirine's food.

After starting the analysis of my corpus, to my surprise I discovered that to grasp the implications of food for *Crescent*, I undoubtedly would have to associate it with memory. Initially, I just wanted to investigate the memory connected to food, then I

recognized not one single type of memory, but I could see that, just like food, memory was strongly invested with other meanings. The importance of memory for the Arab American literature lies in the very fact that it "grounds discussions of assimilation, identity and political issues" (266), as Lisa Majaj remarks in the article "Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory." According to the Palestinian critic,

> memory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups; family stories frequently ground ethnic identification, the popularized search for 'roots' is often articulated as 'remembering who you are.' Memory functions on both a cultural and a personal level to establish narratives of origin, belonging; myths of peoplehood, like memories of childhood, situate the subject and make agency possible. (266)

Indeed, in *Crescent*, as I could conclude, memory grounds discussions of assimilation, identity and political issues. It becomes the medium through which characters negotiate their lives in the U.S., besides enabling "transformative relationships to ethnicity" (Majaj 266).

I strongly agree with Gail De Vos's characterization of the human mind as a sort of closet. As she explais, "many things trigger the opening of that closet: a smell, a sound, a name from the past, a photograph, an object in a second-hand store window. Some memories are happy and others are painful. They come unconsciously and often at times when we are at our most vulnerable" (37). Furthermore, it is as if memory needed a kind of prosthesis to come into being; in Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*, Nadia's Café and, more than never, the photos and the scarf function as such prosthetic device for the characters and fosters their sense of belonging or sharing a common past. Thus, the

photographs and the scarf take on the role of sites of memory as they are invested with symbolic meaning.

As I could conclude, the photographs are indeed a little bit of the character's past they left behind, and manipulating them just underlines their nostalgia. Shuffling some photographs enables the characters to evoke their pasts. Photographs grant a re-connection with a past that is no longer available in their memories, but the very process of manipulating the photos help characters to build their own narratives of life, exteriorizing their deepest concerns.

By constant clicks, the photographer Nathan demonstrates an unusual habit in photographing people. Indeed, his behavior is analogous to the behavior of a hunter in a safari willing to shoot all the animals he sees. Employing this metaphor to describe the photographer's behavior confirms and re-affirms the points I have made earlier when I claim that his behavior was a "true predatory act," to use Susan Sontag's remarks.

As I sought to demonstrate, Nathan's relationship with the objects, in a first glance, seems to be naïve; as a child playing with her new toy, he photographs compulsively. In this perspective, I could conclude that the very act of photographing people for him goes beyond playfulness and represents his desire to partake in Sirine and Han's relationship and in that community originated in Nadia's Café. Photographs, in the case of Hanif, grant the reader to have access to his memories; besides that, they trigger the discussion of photos as being invasive. Han's childhood in Iraq as well as his exile experience is brought into picture demonstrating Abu-Jaber's willingness to explore the implications of such experience in a person's life. The sequence of the events analyzed throughout this master's thesis confirmed my initial impressions in relation to Hanif. To a certain extent he cannot completely embrace the U.S. as a new country due to the recurrent presence of fragments of his past in his life.

Moreover, as the novel comes to confirm, memory takes shape in symbolic objects. The scarf becomes symbolically relevant for the narrative as it is the means through which characters negotiate their memories and try to exorcize the ghosts of traumatic events out of their lives. Sirine, Hanif, and Nathan dispute the same object of memory; for each one of them it has different symbolic meanings. The motif of the scarf, as I could conclude, not only mediates the discussion of personal memories, but it also comes to illustrate the political situation of Iraq and all the atmosphere of extreme intolerance that hangs over the country.

In conclusion, I take advantage of the epigraph by Brillat-Savarin to adapt it to the novel. I even dare to add the question adverb "where" to it: "tell me what and *where* you eat, and I will tell you who you are" as Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* calls for. The Arab food cooked and eaten in the space of the café has a power that transcends anthropological values to become a bridge connecting fragmented worlds, giving the characters a real sense of identity in an otherwise strange culture. By remembering their previous lives back in the old home, immigrants may envisage a future as an ethnic community.

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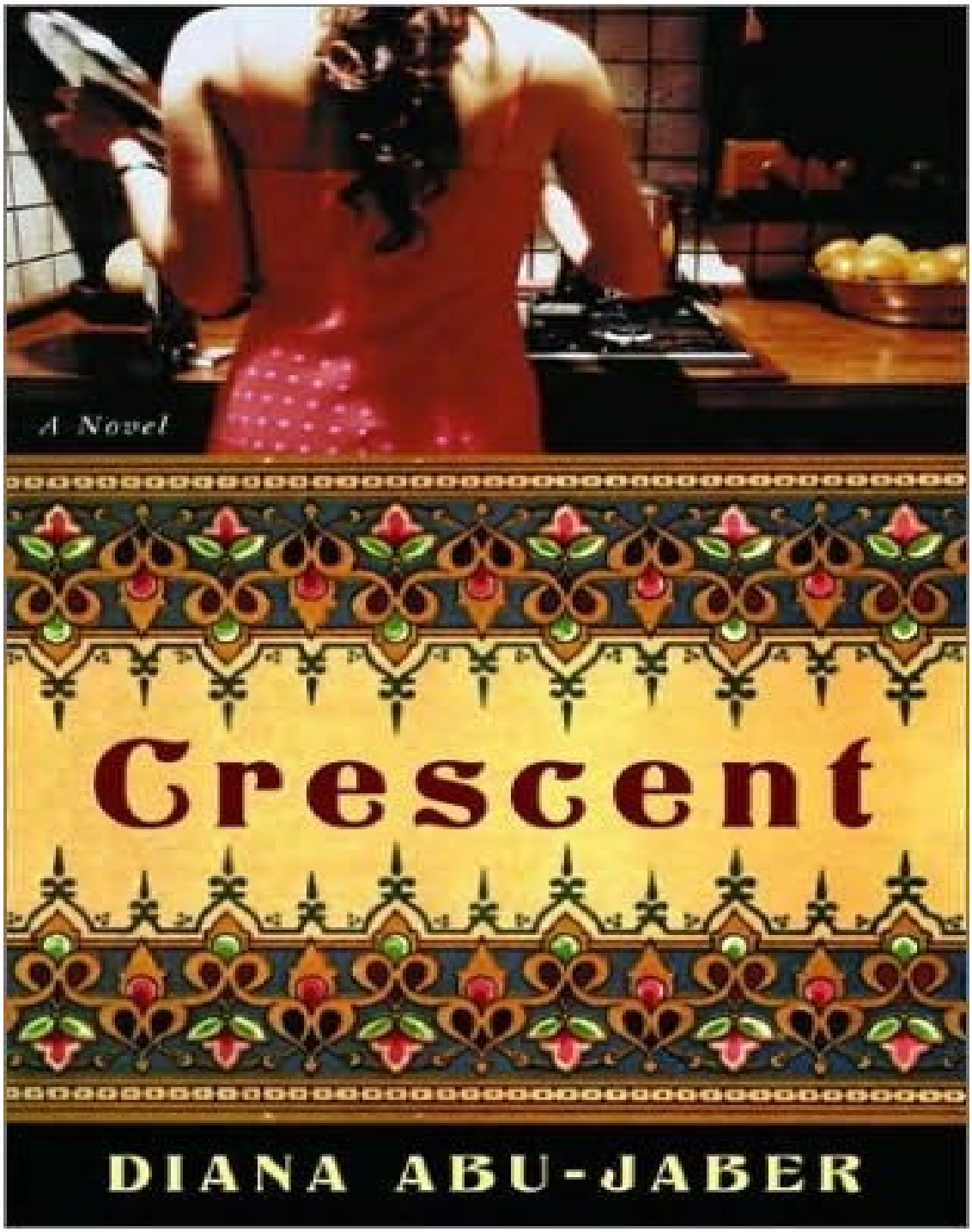
Appendix

1. **Cover of the 1st edition (2003)**



2. Poetic Baklava

For when you need to serenade someone.

**Syrup*

2 cups sugar

1 cup water

Splash of lemon juice

1 teaspoon orange blossom water

1 pound walnuts

1 cup sugar

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 pound butter clarified (melted and

with the top layer skimmed off)

1 box phyllo dough, defrosted

In a saucepan, boil all the syrup ingredients until the mixture turns clear. Cover the syrup and set aside in the refrigerator to cool.

In a food processor, grind together the walnuts, sugar, and cinnamon to a fine, sandy consistency. Set aside.

Preheat the oven 300 degrees.

Carefully unfold the phyllo dough, making sure not to crack or tear it. Keep it covered with a piece of waxed paper to help prevent it from drying out.

Butter the bottom of a shallow basking pan. You can also use a cookie sheet that has at least an inch-high lip. Carefully unpeel the first sheet of phyllo and lay it flat and smooth in the bottom of the pan. Brush with clarified butter. Continue layering sheets of phyllo dough brushing each sheet with butter until you've used half the dough.

Spread the nuts-and-sugar mixture over the dough.

Place another sheet of dough on the mixture and butter it. Continue layering and buttering dough until you've used up the rest.

Using sharp knife, carefully cut through the baklava in long, straight lines to form diamonds or squares (about 2 inches long).

Bake for about 50 minutes or until golden brown. Pour the cooled over the hot baklava. Eat when ready!

Diana Abu-Jaber – *The Language of Baklava* (192 -93)

3. Subsistence Tabbouleh

For when everything is falling apart and there's no time to cook.

1 cup cracked wheat (bulgur, fine-grain)

2 small bunches flat-leaf parsley, minced

2 medium cucumbers, peeled and chopped

3 medium tomatoes chopped

2 tablespoons olive oil

juice of 1 small lemon

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Wash the bulgur and let it soak in water to cover for ½ hour. Drain thoroughly and add the vegetables. Add the oil, lemon, and salt and pepper to taste. Mix well. Cover, and let the tabbouleh marinate in the refrigerator for a couple of hours.

Make 6 to 8 servings

Diana Abu-Jaber – *The Language of Baklava* (143).