MIRRORING HYBRIDITY: THE USE OF ARAB FOLK TRADITION IN LAILA HALABY'S *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND* AND ALIA YUNIS'S *THE NIGHT COUNTER*

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Abstract: This article explores the way in which Laila Halaby in *Once in a Promised Land* and Alia Yunis in *The Night Counter* utilize the Arab folk tradition in novels on Arab and Muslim American experience to counter the dominant narrative that simultaneously erases their extensive history in the United States and juxtaposes it with a forced visibility that is marked by Otherness, threat, and distrust. The article argues that by using folkloric figures and storytelling structures, Halaby and Yunis reverse the positionality of these communities by marking the multiple cultural signifiers that inform their stories in order to construct a palimpsest that reinscribes Arab and Muslim American experiences within narratives that perceive them as problems. As such, the Arab folk tradition emerges as a significant mode in the cultural memory of Arab and Muslim Americans, and the American literary fabric more broadly, and takes on a new meaning in this context.

Keywords: Arab and Muslim American, hybridity, folk tradition, novel, diaspora, 9/11

Migration entails the movement of people and subsequently results in the transfer of cultural symbols and narratives that mark the new literary landscapes in indelible ways. These cultural signifiers traverse physical borders to become not only transnational but translational. As an example, folkloric traditions preserve traces of homes left behind, but also take on new meanings in different contexts. In *Once in a Promised Land* and *The Night Counter*, Laila Halaby and Alia Yunis, respectively, weave stories from Arab folk traditions into novels on the Arab and Muslim immigrant and American experiences after 9/11, when they are paradoxically made highly visible as they are silenced by narratives that perpetuate the notion of suspect and feared communities. In *Once in a Promised Land*, Halaby employs the folkloric tradition in the formation of the structure of the novel and in her use of Nus Nsays and the ghula to problematize the narrative of the American Dream,

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constructing an alternative story that addresses the ominous reality of Arab and Muslim American communities after 9/11. Similarly, *The Night Counter*, by Alia Yunis, is structured around the 1001 Nights and Scheherzade, and utilizes the idea of an umbrella narrative to illustrate the continued unfolding of the stories of this community and the numerous ways that home and belonging can be reimagined. This article traces the way in which Halaby and Yunis draw on stories from the Arab folk tradition to explore Arab and Muslim American experiences of ambivalence and hybridity in a post 9/11 United States, where they must negotiate their identities against domestic and foreign policies that employ a rhetoric of terrorism that makes of these communities perpetual others and insists on false demarcations of here and there, displacing them to the latter.

While both novels address Arab and Muslim American experiences, Halaby focuses on these experiences immediately after the 9/11 attacks. Yunis's novel, on the other hand, includes the stories of earlier generations of Arab immigrants against the backdrop of 9/11. The two novels construct stories that reflect the complexity of these communities and their challenges in a post 9/11 United States; however, the readings of 9/11 in both novels recognize the longstanding persistent images and narratives around these communities. One challenge specific to these communities is that they have had to negotiate their identities and belonging as the United States expands its imperial agenda globally, with a disproportionate focus on the Middle East. This paradigm has led to what Nadine Naber describes as the "diaspora of empire" in which Arabs and Muslims in the United States express a sense of belonging that is diasporic because they are associated primarily with other spaces elsewhere. Naber (2012) states:

Arabs and Muslims living in the United States have been forced to engage with U.S. imperial discourses in their everyday lives . . . "diasporas of empire" [emerge] against the highly invasive and shifting relations of power central to contemporary U.S. neocolonialism and imperialism. Here, empire inscribes itself on the diasporic subject within the domestic (national) borders of empire. (27)

Halaby and Yunis's narratives demonstrate the implications of a "diasporic state of consciousness" where these communities configure their identities and belonging as the United States' foreign policy expands in the Middle East. Naber further asserts that the diaspora of empire destabilizes geographical dichotomies in relation to these communities: "The subjects of the current empire 'over there' also reside 'over here' within the empire itself" (60). Thus, "here" and "there" are inextricably connected.

This inbetweenness is also explored by Carol Fadda-Conrey, who argues that Arab American writers employ a transnational framework that destabilizes

singular dominant narratives and rejects binary constructs that position this community as perpetual Others beyond the boundaries of belonging or citizenship as currently imagined (Fadda-Conrey, 2014: 7). Further, a transnational framework in Arab American writing, Fadda-Conrey maintains, allows for a recognition of the “imaginative connections to both the US and the Arab homeland as well as the spaces of physical travel and mobility between them” (9). Echoing Fadda-Conrey’s argument, both novels emphasize a transnational framework that underscores the ways in which geographical demarcations are unstable and are informed by ideology by weaving stories that reflect the complexity of the experiences of these communities who are connected to numerous spaces, as well as inspired by multiple modes of storytelling. In other words, they engage in what Richard Gray (2011) refers to as “deterritorializing America”:

These fictions resist the challenge of silence by deploying forms of speech that are genuinely crossbred and transitional, subverting the oppositional language of mainstream commentary . . . And they respond to the heterogeneous character of the United States as well as its necessary positioning in a translational context. (17)

Halaby and Yunis’s writing deploy this sense of hybridity to narrate stories that reject dichotomies that reinforce a problematic positionality for Arab and Muslim Americans.

By deploying the folkloric tradition in this way, they disrupt the dichotomy of the self and the threatening Other. Both Halaby and Yunis transport characters from the folkloric traditions to the American literary landscape to demonstrate how Scheherazade and Nus Nsays, like the Arab and Muslim American experience, are firmly located in the American national narrative through the transfer of cultural symbols in the immigrant experience specifically and through global exchanges more generally, a point that Stephen Greenblatt emphasizes through the idea of cultural mobility. According to Greenblatt, cultural mobility has always defined cultures and the idea that cultures are separated by rigid demarcations represented by the nation-state or identity politics does not account for the ways in which “in matters of culture the local has always been irradiated, as it were by the larger world” (2009: 4). Moreover, Greenblatt argues that within the framework of cultural mobility, products of culture are “moved, disguised, translated, transformed, adapted, and reimagined” (4). Within the context of this article, Greenblatt’s framing offers a useful lens to explore the ways in which Halaby and Yunis employ the folkloric tradition in telling the story of Arab and Muslim American experiences and destabilizing narratives that have “reinforced . . . the originary condition of fixity and coherence” (3). In other words, the dominant narrative that espouses a homogenous identity or superficially embraces complexity

but engages in exclusionary rhetoric and practice is illustrative of the problematic condition described by Greenblatt, whereby “settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities” (2) are assumed to exist rather than addressing the processes that challenge any such notion, a point that Greenblatt emphasizes when he writes:

We need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unintended consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of identity and language, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy. (2)

This is relevant particularly for the communities that Halaby and Yunis address in the novels because the stories that they relate before and after 9/11, as well as the way they intersect with other experiences of marginalization, deconstruct the broader dominant narrative, as they ask the reader to consider these processes when approaching all stories on the American landscape.

The use of the Arabic folkloric story of Nus Nsays and the figure of Scheherazade represents what Friederike Pannewick describes as the “performative power of traveling traditions . . . traditions [that] accrue new sematic features through their various journeys in time and space” (2009: 244–245). In the context of Arab and Muslim American experiences, folkloric stories and figures acquire a new significance and enable the audience to reflect on their own stories as they relate to dominant narratives. Thus, stories are cultural forms that are permeated by traces of cultural mobility and therefore engender questions around what constitutes cultural, ethnic, national, etc. identities. Moreover, stories, as Senem Yekenkurul contends, necessitate a dialectical relationship between the storyteller and listener that “influenc[e] how storyteller and listener understand themselves and how others perceive them. Telling stories is an inter-subjective experience” (2011: 54). The dialectical relationship in storytelling, therefore, has the potential to facilitate reflection on and across multiple experiences.

It is even more effective in the context of a national crisis such as the 9/11 attacks, where Arab and Muslim American stories are suppressed by a national discourse that employs what Steven Salaita refers to as “imperative patriotism” whereby “dissent in matters of governance and foreign affairs is unpatriotic and therefore unsavory” (2006: 82) and results in exclusionary binaries such as “you are for us or against us,” that often position these communities as Others. Halaby and Yunis’s fictional depiction of Arab and Muslim experiences encountered in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks problematizes narratives such as these that refuse to represent processes of marginalization. Salaita argues that the reaction

in the days after the attacks was fueled by a negative image of Arabs and Muslims that was already part of the dominant narrative. Further, he contends that the reactions to 9/11 should be analyzed within a historical framework, arguing that systematized exclusionary institutions, such as racism, are a fundamental aspect of the American narrative that dates back to the beginnings of the United States and that experience of Arabs and Muslims is one of many iterations of this impulse. For Salaita, the problematic images and rhetoric employed after the attacks were firmly established in the national culture and that the process of targeting these groups after 9/11 is part of a larger framework of exclusion that Salaita maintains is a fundamental aspect of the dominant exclusionary narrative. In the case of these communities, the racism is further complicated by the United States' involvement in the Middle East. Thus, for Salaita, the backlash after 9/11 was another manifestation of what he refers to as the anti-Arab racism that has always been an aspect of the dominant narrative. It is worth citing Salaita's definition of "anti-Arab racism":

I use it generally to mean acts of physical violence against Arabs based not on chance but largely (or exclusively) on the ethnicity of the victim; moments of ethnic discrimination in schools, civil institutions, and the workplace; the Othering of Arabs based on essentialized or biologically determined ideology; the totalization and dehumanization of Arabs by continually referring to them as terrorists; the marginalization of Arabs as it is informed by exclusionary conceptions of Americanness; the taunting of Arabs with epithets such as *sand nigger*, *dune coon*, *camel jockey*, *towelhead*, and *raghead*; the profiling of Arabs based on name, religion, or country of origin; and the elimination of civil liberties based on distrust of the entire group rather than on the individuals within the group who may merit suspicion. In short, the redirection of classic American racism at a non-White ethnic group whose origins lie in an area of the world marked for colonization by the United States and whose residents are therefore dehumanized for the sake of political expediency. (12–13)

This detailed description of anti-Arab racism provides a lens to examine Halaby and Yunis's fictional depiction of the context that Arab and Muslim Americans encountered in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and to more broadly problematize narratives that refuse to represent processes of marginalization that continue to disproportionately affect non-dominant communities. However, as Salaita argues, the goal of writers like Halaby and Yunis, is not simply to seek belonging but to recover the narrative: "For we are not searching here solely for affirmation. We are searching for the humanity of those who dehumanize us and seeking to recover the *human* from the dehumanization" (2007: 16).

Thus, the cognizance of a marginalized position to which Salaita gestures, rather than remaining a hindrance, offers the possibility of critique and creative production, a point that Edward Said underscores in his articulation of the exilic intellectual. For Said, an intellectual in exile, whether physical or metaphorical, who embraces that position, is attune to historical realities and able to reconfigure identity and belonging without depending on a singular and fixed notion of home. Since the Saidian intellectual does not presume that home exists in an absolute sense, they can envision what problematic narratives seek to obfuscate:

Even if one is not an actual immigrant or expatriate, it is still possible to think as one, to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from the centralizing authorities towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never traveled beyond the conventional and the comfortable. (Said, 1996: 63)

Both Halaby and Yunis's novels are illustrative of the Saidian intellectual position in which ambivalence and dislocation, while jarring, allow for a perspective that engenders a creative and productive energy to destabilize dominant exclusionary narratives while simultaneously configuring multiple and complex senses of belonging.

Once in a Promised Land tells the story of Jassim, a Jordanian hydrologist, and his wife Salwa, a Palestinian Jordanian, in the early days and months after the 9/11 attacks. The novel depicts the struggles of Muslims and Arabs after the attacks and the way in which a heightened patriotism combined with fear led to a destructive paranoia, which had consequences for anyone perceived to be an Other. Halaby's novel maps out the configurations of anti-Arab racism and demonstrates its precarious consequences through the story of Jassim and Salwa. Anti-Arab and Muslim rhetoric quickly formed the foundation of a heightened patriotism because it drew from a familiar repertoire of images of these groups. Halaby utilizes elements of the Arabic folklore to structure the novel and to illustrate the American Dream as a fiction, querying a fundamental aspect of the dominant narrative. Moreover, her use of the Arabic folkloric tradition exemplifies the idea of cultural mobility, whereby the tradition takes on new meaning in the American context in order to problematize the idea that the American Dream is equally accessible to all members of the society. It questions what constitutes belonging and a sense of home.

The novel is divided into six parts. Four sections are couched between the opening and ending sections titled "Before" and "After." This sectioning functions as an important structural device for the story where all that occurs between stems from and is informed by those opening sections. Both parts open with transliteration of the Arabic phrase "*kan ya ma kan fee qadeem az-zamaan*" ("There was and

there wasn't in olden times"), which begins folk tales in the Arabic tradition. The two sections mirror each other in the initial paragraph, which sets the story outside of time, especially the time following the attacks. The two sections then deviate. In "Before," the novel juxtaposes Qur'anic imagery of paradise with a stark picture of the global social, economic, and ecological condition as the story progresses towards the 9/11 attacks, marked at the end of the section:

It was a time when Man's throat was parched and dry, the earth's rivers too narrow and dirty to quench him, its lakes overflowing or drier than the bones from which his flesh hung. Many people clutched to the afterlife promise of *gardens beneath which rivers flow*. (Halaby, 2007: vii)

In doing so, the novel destabilizes the narrative that constructs the 9/11 attacks as an insular event outside of time and disconnected from any national or global networks. Thus, from the outset, intertextuality inscribes the novel with numerous points of intersections; for Salwa and Jassim, their lives intersect with the perpetrators of the attacks only and because of their ethnic and religious identities.

The last section of the novel titled "After," while beginning in the same way as the first section, deviates by reinscribing the Arab folkloric tradition in the larger narrative of the American Dream. In this final section, neither Salwa nor Jassim are specifically named, but both are implied in the folktale of Nus Nsays, which is mentioned throughout the novel. The story of Nus Nsays revolves around a young man who is born small (literally, half of a half) but can achieve great things. When the folktale is related in the novel, Nus Nsays sets off to hunt with the Neighbor's son. They lose their way and are found by the ghula, a creature who deceives the Neighbor's son and tempts him to go to her home. She plans to eat both once they fall asleep. Nus Nsays, realizing her plan, wears out the ghula until she falls asleep and saves his friend. Later, he captures the ghula for his village. Salwa recalls also that she would query her grandmother about the folktale. Her grandmother maintains that the tale of Nus Nsays is an allegory for the Palestinian struggle against oppression. However, she is unable to provide Salwa with an answer for what the ghula represents.

In "After," the idea of the United States as a "promised land" is problematized by this framing. It is clear to the reader that Salwa and Jassim's stories have collapsed into the folktale of Nus Nsays. Salwa takes the place of the Neighbor's son as the one who is deceived by the ghula, while Jassim represents the nightingale who initially tries to warn the young girl (Salwa) about the ghula. However, the nightingale, also deceived by the ghula, perceives her to be simply an old lady, ceases to warn the girl, but eventually resumes the warnings. Hassan—Salwa's neighbor who proposes to her before Jassim—is the hero who tries to save the

young girl from the ghula; while attempting to kill the ghula, though, he inadvertently stabs the girl, breaking the spell and causing her to realize the deceptiveness of her surroundings. It becomes clear to the reader the ghula is the narrative of the American Dream. The novel ends with: "*There's no 'they lived happily ever after'?* 'Happily ever after' happens only in American fairy tales. *Wasn't this an American fairy tale?* It was and it wasn't" (335). Using the tale of Nus Nsays, Halaby subverts the narrative of the United States as the Promised Land for all.

It is important to note that the hardcover edition of the novel contains a section that was later omitted in the paperback edition,¹ which ends with the ominous statement: "But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. Nothing and everything" (viii). After this initial introduction, the hardback edition continues with an exchange between a security officer and the narrator, who represents Arabs and Muslims. Airport scenes and encounters of interrogation have become representative of the larger framework of suspicion that these communities face. This is underscored by Mucahit Bilici in his discussion of Muslim comedy and the space of the airport:

At the airport, those who have so far (in the city, at the ticket counter, and so on) been treated equal suddenly become suspect. At the internal borders of the nation, they suddenly feel their protected status begin to evaporate... Strip search and other security rites of passage through the border show the hard edge of the nation. (2010: 198)

After the narrator is chosen for further screening because of profiling, they respond to the security officer's questions by directing the reader to put all their preconceptions about Arabs and Muslims into a box to proceed with the story. These stereotypes, the narrator insists, could be deeply etched into the reader's psyche and include notions of these communities' proclivity for violence and patriarchal hegemony. Further, the narrator demands that derogatory names like "Sand Nigger, Rag Head, and Camel Jockey" be put in the box. In this way, the reader is directed to engage in a process of self-reflection at the outset regarding the construction of narratives.

The 9/11 attacks are marked in the early pages of the novel with references to graphic details of loss. While not the direct result of the attacks, the rhetoric of patriotism, surveillance, and impending war compound Jassim and Salwa's marital struggles, causing their lives to unravel. Salwa, perhaps more than any other character, develops a strong sense of disillusionment when she is confronted with the heightened patriotism after the attacks. In contrast to Jassim, who comes to the United States as an adult, Salwa's connection is from birth. Born in the United States, Salwa grows up with a restlessness and desire to return to the land of her

birth. Salwa's sense of home is complicated by the fact that she is Palestinian, Jordanian, and American. In other words, her search for home is perpetual and out of reach. At the outset of the novel, however, Salwa perceives home to be in the land of her birth and this is marked by her love for silk pajamas, which for her family signifies luxury and desire for life in the United States. However, her perception of the United States is based on the images of consumerism in the American narrative that is exported to other parts of the world and not a lived experience:

America pulled and yanked on her from a very young age, forever trying to reel her in. Only the America that pulled at her was not the America of her birth, it was the exported America of Disneyland and hamburgers, Hollywood and the Marlboro man, and therefore impossible to find. Once in America, Salwa still searched and tripped and bought smaller and sexier pajamas in the hope that she would one day wake up in that Promised Land. (Halaby, 2007: 49)

The novel deconstructs the notion that the narrative of the land of opportunity represents a promised land for all its inhabitants by employing the framework of an Arab folktale. The phrase "promised land" evokes a place of happiness and success. The post-9/11 context, however, highlights the discrepancies between the experiences of Arab and Muslims, and other marginalized communities, and an unrepresentative national narrative that suggests that they are not the intended audience. Furthermore, the notion of a promised land is complicated by Salwa's Palestinian identity where Palestine represents a promised land, one that is ever present but remains unattainable.

Over the course of the novel there is a clear transformation in the way that Salwa and Jassim view their surroundings and their narrative of self in a post-9/11 United States. Each comes to the United States for different reasons: Jassim for education and work and Salwa for marriage. Jassim's connection to the United States and Jordan is complicated by the role each space plays in his narrative: "His Ph.D. and experience were very impressive, but America, once tasted, is hard to spit out, with its shiny tools and machinery. Jordan pumps through the blood, but America stays in the mouth" (64). Thus, while both places have influenced Jassim, his connection to America is more superficial and based on financial success, while his connection to Jordan is deep-rooted. Throughout the novel, Jassim appears to be settled in his life in United States, but it becomes evident that he is consumed by the events around him. When Salwa expresses her concern about a possible backlash against Arabs, Muslims, and those perceived to belong to those groups, Jassim questions her fears: "'People are not so ignorant as to take revenge on a Lebanese family for the act of a few extremist Saudis who destroyed those buildings' (21). Immediately, Jassim is proven wrong when a Sikh man is killed

because he was mistaken as a Muslim. Even though he does not express his anxiety about the explicit displays of patriotism, Jassim is aware that the events have created a hostile atmosphere.

Over the course of the novel, Jassim becomes cognizant of displays of increased scrutiny by other characters; for example, after swimming one day, he reflects on the actions of some of his co-workers and how their demeanor towards him has changed: "Jassim felt a vague prickle as he reviewed his comments at the meeting, as he analyzed the dropped gazes of several of the staff members, the less than warm reception he had received from some of the city's engineers, a group that usually welcomed him with doughnuts and laughter" (26). Although Jassim is disturbed by the changes he notices at work, he rejects the idea that they stem from the attacks. Jassim's preoccupation with the attacks is focused around the images of destruction that continually play in his mind. His reaction to the event indicates an individual who is struggling to comprehend the immensity and heinousness of the violence on a human level. He thinks about the events in terms of an intensely corporeal experience that reflects a human loss, not an American, Arab, or Muslim loss. It is only when he becomes the victim of an FBI investigation that Jassim realizes that the loss has been defined as American and that he is subsequently marked as an Other.

The FBI investigation stems from a false tip by Jassim's co-worker and Salwa's client from the bank. He is reported when his behavior changes as a result of an accident where he killed Evan, a young man, who is later found to harbor anti-Arab sentiments. When meeting Evan's mother, Mary, she reveals to Jassim how the attacks affected Evan:

See, when 9/11 happened, Evan was freaked out, totally freaked out . . . [he] ranted and raved about how Arabic people should all be kicked out of this country, rounded, herded up, and thrown out . . . Then he started talking about how he wished he could kill an Arab—my own son talking about killing someone! (200–201)

Evan's reaction reflects the disquieting fear of others underlying the narrative of patriotism. His attitude towards Arabs is embodied in the "Terrorist Hunting License" sticker on his skateboard. This sticker not only conflates Arabs with a singular notion of a "terrorist," but it also dehumanizes them by likening them to animals to be hunted. Evan is immediately challenged about the sticker by a Black man waiting for the bus: "Son, there's so much more to it than that . . . Isn't it crazy what's happening to this world?" (76) He critiques Evan's claim that he can recognize a terrorist based on presumed characteristics and demands a more complicated analysis of the situation in the post-9/11 context. Halaby draws on the experiences of other marginalized groups to comment on the implications

of employing race, ethnicity, and religion to determine belonging to the nation. She does this by weaving in characters from other communities to elucidate the aporias in the dominant narrative that asserts inclusion through the idea of “a land of immigrants,” as it simultaneously marks numerous communities as Others. This is made clear near the end of the novel in a scene when Salwa notices the Guatemalan gardeners before being attacked by Jake, with whom she had a brief affair. She realizes that the story of the American Dream is unattainable for anyone configured as an Other:

[S]he imagined the miles of desert they must have crossed for the opportunity to trim and mow and prune, the perils they must have endured to have their clear shot at the American Dream. “It’s all a lie!” she wanted to shout. “A huge lie.” A lie her parents believed in enough that they paved her future with the hope of glass slippers and fancy balls . . . [S]he would have been much better off munching on fava beans from her ceiling basket [a reference to Nus Nsays’s story]. She looked at those dark men looking at her and from a distance she could see their sacrifices, the partial loss of self that they must have agreed to in coming to America, the signing over of the soul. (316–317)

There is a recognition that her story is not insular and is replete with traces of other communities whose stories and experiences have left and continue to mark the American landscape in ways that repeatedly disturb the dominant narrative of access and belonging.

Also, Jassim becomes cognizant of his positionality during an FBI investigation, made more contentious because of Evan’s sticker and his anti-Arab sentiments. While Evan can no longer be questioned on those beliefs, the FBI agents position Jassim from the outset as a threatening Other and make the impossible demand that he explain Evan’s position in relation to his own defense, echoing the often-made demand that Arabs and Muslim condemn the acts of terrorists. In the post-9/11 context, this accident and Jassim’s subsequent disorientation are woven into a much more sinister narrative in which Jassim is a possible Arab terrorist with access to Tuscon’s water supply. The fallout from the accident and the investigation threatens Salwa and Jassim’s life together, all of which occurs within an atmosphere of exclusionary patriotism. Eventually, the narrative of an American Dream that prompted Jassim to remain in the United States and Salwa to marry Jassim is unraveled.

The FBI’s interrogation of Jassim exemplifies the way in which these communities are perceived with suspicion. It becomes apparent that Jassim is already guilty by association: Jassim is asked about Evan, both his and Salwa’s reactions 12, and whether he knew the hijackers personally. As Jassim replies to their

problematic queries, it is the first time that he acknowledges the backlash against Arabs and Muslims. This recognition coincides with his disillusionment towards the narrative of the American Dream:

Jassim couldn't help himself. "Means is one thing, motive is another. I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab ..." I have spent my entire life trying to find ways to make water safe and accessible for everyone. Just because I am an Arab, because I was raised a Muslim, you want to believe that I am capable of doing evil . . . Yes, finally he saw what had been sitting at the back of his consciousness for some time in a not-so-whispered voice: *with or against*. But was he not *with*? *I understand American society*, he wanted to scream. *I speak your language. I pay taxes to your government. I play your game. I have a right to be here.* (232–234)

Here Jassim questions the agents' right to weave a narrative for Jassim that strips him of his agency to determine his identity and that pigeonholes him as a potential terrorist. Furthermore, Halaby problematizes the dichotomy of the model minority and the terrorist, which negates the many experiences between these two extreme poles. There is a clear imbalance between the two that is revealed in scenes of interrogation where there is already presumed guilt.

Halaby's novel elucidates the way that a national trauma and/or shifts in the socio, political, cultural landscape often reveal underlying issues and mechanisms. In this context, the novel challenges the narrative of inclusivity stemming from an immigrant history and demonstrates the problematic discrepancies and underpinnings. Ali Behdad (2005) maintains that the image of the immigrant has fluctuated between that of a model citizen and a threatening alien. The use of both aspects of the figure of the immigrant has been employed throughout the history of the United States when there have been economic and social crises. Thus, the narrative that the United States is the land of immigrants, Behdad asserts, obscures the tension that has been and continues to be a foundational aspect of the national culture. Behdad argues that constructing an American national narrative requires a process of disavowal, where the violent beginnings of the United States and the economic motivations of immigration are suppressed in order to construct a mythical narrative of history. In this narrative, the immigrant is employed to allow for a continual process of what Behdad refers to as "a national project of self-renewal" (7). This tension, which is fundamental to this process of disavowal, emerges in Halaby's novel. The image of the United States as the Promised Land, according to Behdad, represents only one aspect of the narrative, which has shifted in response to economic motivations and attempts to construct a national identity.

In a similar move, Yunis employs the figure of Scheherazade from the Arabic folk tradition in her novel *The Night Counter* in order to upend the narratives around immigration, belonging, and patriotism. In the 1001 Nights, Scheherazade plays a significant role in the frame story, whereby Scheherazade marries King Shahryar in an act of resistance in order to prevent him from engaging in femicide after his first wife's infidelity. Every night, Scheherazade tells Shahryar a story only to stop at dawn at a critical point in the tale so that he will allow her to live another day. By the end of the 1001 Nights, Shahryar falls in love with Scheherazade and ends his vengeful campaign. Using that frame structure, the novel tells the story of Fatima Abdullah, the matriarch of an Arab American family, who believes that she has 1001 days remaining until her death after Scheherazade appears to her. Fatima begins to narrate her family's story to the immortal Scheherazade, who visits Fatima nightly with the hope that Scheherazade will then reveal how she will die. However, Fatima comes to understand that Scheherazade's presence does not represent death but in fact life through the power of storytelling:

"There is not just one way to hear a sentence." Scheherazade sighed. "All I meant was that life is in the end a collection of stories that are connected through us. Stories keep us entertained and enlightened, and if we don't know the end, all the better. Look, I'm the one who kept our stories going by not telling you the end, as I don't really know it. You already thought you knew the ending, but you didn't. Indeed, those are my favorite endings . . . Death is written for us no matter what, but living your life so that it is filled with stories is the best way to wait for it" (Yunis, 2010: 337–338).

Fatima's encounters with Scheherazade reveal that the process of storytelling, in fact the basis of narrative construction, is a self-reflective act that offers a space for the storyteller to engage and put forward their own narrative.

In *The Night Counter*, Yunis transforms the role of Scheherazade from a storyteller to the audience of Fatima's stories to allow Fatima to share the stories of her multigenerational family and more broadly to share Arab American stories. In addition, Yunis destabilizes the Orientalist depictions of Scheherazade that reduce her to a sexualized figure simply at the whim of a tyrannical king, diminishing her agency. Rather, here, Scheherazade has outlived all her family and rejects representations that stem from an Orientalist repertoire. For example, when Scheherazade sees the sign for Zade's (Fatima's grandson) business, she is perturbed:

The place was called Scheherazade's Diwan Café. Under the words was a drawing of a half-naked belly dancer. Who is that supposed to be? Surely not me, she thought . . . She was not happy to see her stories—and herself—so cheapened by commerce. (42)

By challenging the Orientalist portrayal of Scheherazade, Yunis counters the figure of the threatening Arab and/or Muslim immigrant/foreigner and the image of the silenced Arab and Muslim woman by tracing the historical trajectory of Arab Americans who have been part of the American landscape and disrupting one-dimensional and politically charged narratives, thus weaving them into inclusive frame stories. As in *Once in a Promised Land*, *The Night Counter* addresses the challenges faced by Arab and Muslim Americans in a post-9/11 context marked by intensified patriotism that positions these communities as internal enemies that need to be surveilled.

The Night Counter tells the story of the Abdullah family through conversations between Fatima and Scheherazade, who is visible only to Fatima. Fatima, believing that her death is imminent, attempts to put everything in order, including designating who will inherit personal belongings and most importantly her family home in Lebanon that she has not seen since immigrating to the United States with her husband, Marwan. As Fatima plans her final directives, she reveals to Scheherazade aspects of her family stories. Fatima's personal narrative reflects the history of Arab immigration to the United States and of the Middle East political landscape. We learn early in the novel that Fatima, like many early Arab immigrants, hailed from the Levant region, traveling to the United States as a result of the political shifts in the early part of the twentieth century. Fatima's first husband, Marwan, was employed in the Ford company and then at General Motors in Detroit. After his death, Fatima marries Marwan's friend Ibrahim and together have nine children, in addition to Laila from Fatima's marriage to Marwan. Through conversations with Scheherazade, the reader learns about aspects of each of the children's lives, which weaves a narrative on Arab and Muslim American experience. Further, the stories are told against the backdrop of a post-9/11 context in which Fatima's grandson, Amir, a gay young aspiring actor in Los Angeles, is being investigated by the FBI, leading to the investigation of the entire Abdullah family, on a false tip from a spurned lover.

Rather than Scheherazade narrating stories to Shahryar to save herself, it is Fatima who is narrating her tale, in order to save her children from what she deems are the ordeals in their lives before she dies. Thus, Fatima's story becomes the frame story from which her children's stories stem. For both Scheherazade and Fatima, storytelling is an act of agency. They control the construction of their narratives. In this way, Yunis not only employs the figure of Scheherazade but also the structure of the 1001 Nights in order to narrate the story of Fatima and her family across generations and particularly in the 9/11 context of surveillance and fear of the immigrant Other. Similar to Halaby's use of the Arab folk tradition, Yunis's use of Scheherazade, who is able to escape the state's surveillance, and formulas like "*kan ma kan, fi qadim al-zaman*" (233), demonstrates the mobility

of these cultural elements in a way that parallels movement patterns of migration, and how they are employed to offer a new dimension to the story, in this context to counter a dominant narrative that excludes these experiences. Utilizing the figure of Scheherazade and her story framework, Yunis relays multiple dimensions of belonging to the American landscape and underscores the problematic aspects of the heightened patriotism that engages in an amnesic reading of history that positions the immigrant figure as a threat. Akin to the way that the 1001 Nights weaves together numerous stories with multiple points of intersections, Yunis engages in a parallel process of storytelling where the characters' stories not only inform one another but also the broader national narrative. In other words, the multiplicity and multidirectionality of cultural mobility produces a narrative in a constant process of unfolding that mirrors the traces of immigrant experiences in the context of the United States and the myriad ways those experiences inform the cultural landscape.

As Fatima narrates her family's stories to Scheherazade, she is also addressing the struggles of her Arab and Muslim American family as they, like other Arab and Muslim Americans, become a highly visible minority after 9/11. As in *Once in a Promised Land*, the 9/11 attacks are mentioned early in the novel and form the backdrop of the larger story. As a family and as individuals, they must navigate a contentious post 9/11 period. Scheherazade and the use of the reverse storytelling allows the reader to trace the way in which Arab and Muslim Americans are disproportionately the subject of policies and images that position them as a perceived threat, a point that Behdad underscores in his discussion of legislation that permitted the surveillance and disciplining of these communities in a manner that compromised their civil liberties (2005: 170–171). Specifically, while Amir is the initial subject of the FBI investigation, it results in a full-scale investigation of the entire Abdullah family, where the minute details of their lives are elevated to a cause of concern. Like Jassim's experience, the FBI investigation of Amir and his family stems from a foundation built on the Arab and Muslim as a threatening Other, where occurrences are extracted from their context and woven together as part of an incriminating narrative with tangible consequences regarding civil liberties. The precarious situation of the Arab and Muslim communities is underscored by the investigations; however, the use of Scheherazade and the 1001 structure allows for the humanization of the individual characters by providing depth and nuance to their stories through the use of the layering of details and by tracing the multiple networks and points of intersection, as opposed to the investigations that reduce the characters to one-dimensional threatening Others that obscure their humanity. Each of Fatima's children and grandchildren's stories offer another dimension to the numerous Arab American experiences that have marked the American landscape and is questioned after the 9/11 attacks.

Throughout the novel, a picture of Arab immigration to the United States, specifically, and to the Americas, more broadly emerges. This is an important aspect of the novel, as it situates Arab immigrant experiences firmly within the historical narratives of the United States. In order to trace the transition to a threatening minority, Yunis weaves the Arab immigrant experience into the story in order to challenge the narrative that they are defined by foreignness when, as she lays out in the novel, they are part and parcel of the history of immigration and their presence precedes 9/11 and is not defined by it. The novel indicates this history through discussion of language(s) use and their intersections, identity construction, and the connections between Arab and Muslim communities and other immigrant and historically marginalized communities in the United States and the Americas.

The novel employs language as a representative medium of historical traces and encounters. There are numerous references to the way in which the use of a language marks a presence and tells a story that extends beyond the actual words. For example, Fatima's encounter with Spanish in Los Angeles often leads to reflections on historical encounters and immigrant experiences. Specifically, Fatima mentions at several points that on the bus she was mistakenly assumed to speak Spanish. In that context, the presumption is that she is an immigrant of Mexican descent living in Los Angeles, which leads Fatima to reflect on the introduction and intersection of languages in different locales. After one such encounter, Fatima says,

"Do I look like I speak Spanish or something?" . . . "Well, of course Mexicans look like me. The Arabs were in Spain for eight hundred years, and then we left Spain and they went to Mexico. Appearances travel across oceans, you know. If only we'd made the Spaniards learn Arabic, then they would have made the Mexicans speak Arabic instead of Spanish, and my conversations on the bus wouldn't be so boring." (4)

This quote underscores how language contains within it the traces of historical encounters and is representative of cultural mobility. Throughout the novel, there are several references to a language being employed and the history that it reflects. In doing so, Yunis not only firmly locates Spanish and Arabic, in this case, on the American landscape, but she also challenges the narratives that suggest that languages follow a single trajectory without numerous points of intersection as they migrate. In the novel, language mirrors Fatima's journey and other immigrants.

Along with the figure of Scheherazade and the 1001 Nights, Yunis further underscores the intersection between the oral and written forms of a language and tradition as another gesture towards contesting dominant narratives that draw on binaries. The challenge to the oral and written binary is underscored by the figure

of Scheherazade and Fatima, who numerous times throughout the novel highlights that she is illiterate, orally narrating her stories within the structure of the novel, a written work. Fatima's daughter, Nadia, not only illustrates the intersections of a fictional "here" and "there," but also the intersection between oral and written. Fatima's daughter and a professor of Middle East Studies, born in the United States, studied Arabic as a result of the 1967 war. While she uses a form of Arabic, she is frustrated by the way Arabs question her authenticity because of her use of Classical Arabic as opposed to a dialect. This is illustrated in an interaction between Nadia and a potential client of Zade's matchmaking service: "'Your mother is not Arab?' the Qatari asked Zade. This always silenced Nadia. It shamed her that she was a widely quoted expert on Middle Eastern languages and yet was more convincing as an American" (45). Using Classical Arabic is perceived by the Qatari to position Nadia as an American; however, her character elucidates the illusory distinction between the oral and written dimensions of language that are intertwined and inform each other. Moreover, by employing the different dimensions of language and their connections to perceived identities, Yunis draws attention to the instability of demarcations that do not account for the nuances of experience and the numerous points and ways that intersections are manifested. Nadia's experience as an Arab American with the Arabic language does not mirror her parents' experience, for which it is their mother tongue; however, her sense of self is informed by her journey with the language, whether in its oral or written form (represented by Classical Arabic); it remains central to the construction of her sense of self. Similarly, this tenuous binary between the oral and written dimensions of storytelling is destabilized more broadly with the figure of Scheherazade and the novel itself.

Not only does Yunis problematize unrepresentative binaries, she emphasizes the complexity of experiences by tracing various intersections (spaces, experiences, communities, etc.). These intersections are reproduced throughout the novel and function as an organizing structure that is employed to contest narratives that mute differences and nuances of experience. This is indicated in the way that Yunis weaves together the oral and written narrative traditions, as discussed earlier, as well the individual characters' stories and their relation to the broader stories of various communities in the United States. This structure allows Yunis to reveal the intricacies of relationships as embodied between the characters, even those eventually brought together because of the FBI investigation, common experiences of marginalization, and different narrative traditions (oral and written), exemplified by the figure of Scheherazade and the umbrella frame story. A primary intersection concerns the relationships to spaces, whether physical locales or nostalgic memories. For example, Yunis queries illusory demarcation of binaries such as "here" and "there" and the way in which Arab and Muslim Americans as

communities are impacted by this narrative. This is illustrated by the inward and outward vision of a character such as Fatima, who has lived her adult life in the United States but remains connected to Lebanon through her abandoned home. This is also experienced by her ex-husband Ibrahim, children, and grandchildren, whose individual stories are anchored in a connection, physical, emotional, and/or psychological, to multiple spaces. Ibrahim, like Fatima, experiences nostalgia for the Middle East, demonstrated by his weekly ritual of awaiting passengers from Amsterdam in transit from Lebanon and Jordan. The passengers represent memories of another home for Ibrahim:

They [the passengers] weren't his relatives, but as they wept and embraced their waiting entourages, he would hear the sound of his childhood dinners in their hyperbolic greetings. He would smell his mother's evening gatherings . . . If he was lucky, he would inhale jasmine with the arrivals, it being in bloom in Lebanon now. (19–20)

His memory of Lebanon is experienced in multiple sensory dimensions, auditory and olfactory, preserving a connection to another space that is woven into his experience in the United States. Further, Yunis employs signifiers in the novel to symbolize these intersections; a poignant example is the fig tree that while initially struggling to blossom in Los Angeles eventually bears fruit: "How had she missed this miracle? A tree that had not fruited in sixty-seven years had found a home in America" (331). The tree symbolizes Arab and Muslim presence in the United States and their belonging to the American landscape. Using the image of the fig, Yunis disputes the narrative of foreignness projected on these communities that depict them as simply a transplant; rather, their rootedness in the United States is deepened and informed by their connections to multiple spaces.

As in Halaby's novel, Yunis tackles the challenges of a post-9/11 United States, where certain groups are depicted as threatening Others, thereby excluding their belonging to the nation. The novel underscores the complexity of belonging which becomes even more difficult after the 9/11 attacks, when an exclusive patriotism, imperative patriotism as described by Salaita, reemerges and determines who belongs to the nation and who should be surveilled as an outsider and Other. While Amir is the primary focus of the FBI investigation, the entire family is investigated by agent Sherri Hazad. The name of the agent is a play on the name Scheherazade, suggesting her participation in a constructed narrative, and emphasizes that the attacks and the heightened paranoia now serve as a framing device for the experience of Arab and Muslim Americans, as the subjects of surveillance and a process of Othering. In this context of increased visibility, the challenges of belonging are amplified and are experienced in different ways by individual family members.

Amir, for example, only receives stereotypical roles that often cast him as the terrorist, despite his desire to play other roles. In an exchange with his agent, Amir expresses his frustration with being pigeonholed by the terrorist image:

“You have an audition at CBS tomorrow. Nine A.M.,” Darcy Dagrou, his agent, shouted on the line. “Wear the extra-long beard to this one. No mustache.” “Jesus Christ, I’m tired of auditioning for every terrorist role,” Amir said. “Don’t flatter yourself, Osama”—she continued shouting—“because there are a lot of terrorist auditions that don’t ask for you. And dude, it’s an audition to be a New York cabbie. So stop stereotyping Hollywood. Don’t wear anything with chenille. If they think you’re gay, they’ll never let you audition for the terrorist parts.” (26)

Interestingly, in this example, despite Darcy’s claim regarding Amir’s presumption of Hollywood, which often casts Arabs and Muslims as terrorists (Shaheen, 2012), she substantiates his point with her final comment. Her instructions imply that Amir’s success depends on an assumed visible identity as a heterosexual Arab and Muslim man, in a one-dimensional figure, who then can be categorized as a terrorist. The irony, however, is that the costumes heighten the investigation as the FBI reads these disguises as indications of sinister activity. The multiple dimensions of Amir’s narrative of self are erased by a post-9/11 context that refuses to recognize the various facets of his identity and seeks to project loaded signifiers that make him into a threatening Other.

While Amir seeks recognition of his lived experience as an Arab Muslim American gay man, Randa, his aunt, attempts to suppress her Arab and Muslim identity as a coping mechanism in a nation that sees these communities as Others: “[W]ith September 11, Arabs were back, worse than ever. Dina [Randa’s daughter], who hadn’t been alive in 1973, didn’t remember Abscam and Munich. Randy had worked hard to make such history irrelevant to all three of her daughters” (Yunis, 2010: 161). From a young age, Randa understood the significance of perception and its effect on her sense of belonging, especially against the backdrop of political events such as the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. She demanded that her parents appear more American. Further, as an adult, she refuses to visibly and culturally identify as an Arab. She changes her name and her husband Bishar’s name to Randy and Bud, respectively, alters her appearance with plastic surgery, and gives her daughters American names with the objective of passing. Further, Randa offers to work with the FBI as an informant until she realizes that it would identify her as an Arab: “I just didn’t want anyone thinking that Bud and I were terrorists, but then I realized by offering to help them I would let the neighbors find out that we were Arabs, and that just was worse than offering to be patriotic” (350). Randa’s character problematizes the notion of profiling,

where an individual can be identified based on a perception, as she was able to pass until the investigation. She made herself visible along different lines that meant muting aspects of her identity: "Randy had built a life doing all the right things for maximum viewing . . . Hell, if she didn't think she'd get caught, she would have tried to join the Daughters of the American Revolution" (161). Thus, the various members of the family employ differing strategies to negotiate their positionality in order to maintain agency in the narrative of Otherness projected on to them.

The reverse storytelling by Fatima upends the national narrative that emerges post-9/11 in which immigrants are viewed through binaries as either model minorities or threatening aliens. Through the nuances of her children's experiences in the United States and her own story for which Scheherazade is her primary audience, Fatima demonstrates the way in which she thoroughly marked the numerous spaces that inform her identity and how her story and those of all communities are a configuration of intersections that form intricate networks that are obscured in national narratives that project a homogenous community, irrespective of the definitions of the homogeneity. In other words, through the malleability of the 1001 framework, the novel weaves a picture of Arab, Muslim, and immigrant experiences that draw from multiple timeframes and spaces that challenge the singularity and linearity of a national narrative that excludes them.

Both Halaby and Yunis's use of the Arabic folkloric tradition allows for reflection and recuperation of Arab and Muslim American narratives that are erased in the dominant socio, cultural, and political narrative that determines belonging to the nation. Halaby and Yunis's novels destabilize the problematic images that have been employed to pigeonhole these communities as threatening others. In other words, they reject the images of the model minority and the terrorist, both of which are constructed and projected onto these communities to configure an exclusionary national identity. Furthermore, these problematic constructs negate the multiplicity and complexity of Arab and Muslim American lived experiences. Both writers recognize the possibilities of folkloric stories that stem from their mobility and malleability that allow for a mapping of intersecting experiences that reveal the underlying mechanisms of the dominant narrative. In doing so, they produce a palimpsest that reinscribes the multifaceted and complex stories of these communities, including the stories that inspire and mark their identities, as well as the stories of other marginalized communities. As such, the text itself becomes a hybrid product like that of Arab and Muslims Americans themselves and reflects a multidimensional process of cultural, political, and power negotiation from which unfolds the numerous stories of these communities on the American landscape.

Note

1. When asked about the omission in an email exchange, Halaby stated that there was concern that the opening deterred readership, resulting in lower sales of the hardcover.

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