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Exotic Arabs and American Anxiety: Representations of Culinary Tourism in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*

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The novel *Crescent* (2003) by Arab American writer Diana Abu-Jaber is situated at the confluence of a series of pivotal events in America's association with Iraq. Textually speaking, it is a romance novel that focuses on a relationship cultivated during the first Gulf War between the protagonist, Sirine, a blonde thirty-nine-year-old Arab American chef who works at a Lebanese café in Los Angeles, and Hanif Al Eyad (Han), an Iraqi professor of linguistics and Arabic literature who lectures at a nearby university.¹ The relationship functions as a means through which Sirine begins to learn about Iraq—the country in which her father was born—and the Arabic component of her own cultural identity: as well as learning from Han about Iraq's history, religion, geography and culture, she confronts her fears about Saddam Hussein's regime, the threat it presents to America and the dubious nature of America's involvement in the region. Contextually speaking, the novel has as its background a cultural environment in which concerns about Muslims, Arabs and terrorism were gaining an increasing urgency. Presented for publication just weeks prior to the 9/11 attacks, and finally published (after revisions) in 2003 a month before Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced, the text is linked to a post-9/11 cultural milieu in which countries stereotypically associated with terrorism became “interesting” even as they were homogenized, conflated, and confused.

In this essay, I examine *Crescent's* treatments of an exoticized Arabic culture and the relationship of this to a post-9/11 American culture eclipsed by anxieties about terrorism. I am primarily concerned with the text's representation of what I call “culinary tourism”—its characters' attempts to access culture (and Arabic culture in particular) by adopting an “exploratory relationship with the edible world.”² In a novel in which the protagonist is a chef and in which the purchasing of ingredients, preparation of food, and serving of meals occur throughout, food becomes a vehicle

through which the text critically explores the dialectics of a post-9/11 American exoticism: the fear of a vaguely defined Arabic or Islamic culture, on the one hand, and the potential for its strangeness to be seen as fascinating on the other. Exoticism, as numerous critics have discussed, is always a politicized dialectical discourse that oscillates between poles of strangeness and familiarity.³ If, as Tzvetan Todorov argues, “knowledge is incompatible with exoticism,” *Crescent’s* depictions of food reflect upon the coexistence of vaguely defined fears and fascinations and the ways in which apparently sympathetic representations of difference are subject to (mis)interpretation and manipulation.⁴ Food in *Crescent* is not just a physical substance, but rather is what Paula Torreiro calls “edible metaphor.”⁵ Representations of food in *Crescent* provide the text with a way to reflect critically upon its characters’ problematic sense of communion with exotic destinations: their seeking of assurances about the essential “goodness” of the places from which food heralds, and of their own liberal acceptance of those places as a means of assuaging anxiety in an age of terror. At the same time as critically reflecting upon its characters’ liberalism, though, the novel, I will argue, remains invested at the formal level in the exoticism it strives to destabilize. *Crescent’s* representations of culinary tourism are rife with inconsistencies and contradictions that reveal an underlying anxiety in the text itself about how to represent the cultures loosely associated with terrorism.

Other commentators have discussed *Crescent’s* representations of an exotic Arabic culture, but most have flattened the novel into a kind of cultural exposé, a means by which readers can, along with Sirine, learn about Iraq. Robin E. Field, for example, argues that:

Abu-Jaber humanizes a country whose subtleties of character and culture have been destroyed by its relentless association with the “axis of evil” and “weapons of mass destruction” ... [Her] Iraq is inhabited by vividly-drawn village families, whose women grind spices in the kitchens while their men work from dawn to dusk in the orchards. ... In Abu-Jaber’s Baghdad, the young people gather in cafes to recite poetry and argue politics.⁶

Abu-Jaber herself also talks about her literary project in *Crescent* in didactic terms; she suggests that writing and reading are a liberal corrective for the stereotypes circulating about Iraq in post-Gulf War and post-9/11 America:

I really wanted to convey the richness and the depth of the cultural wealth in Iraq. The more I studied it, the more I felt so strongly about that project. There is this treasure there that we don’t know anything about—people have no idea what’s in Iraq. This was before the whole second conflict was going on, after the first Persian Gulf War—it would have

been about 1999, 2000—and I just thought, “I want people to know.”⁷

Although Field regards her as something of an authority on Iraq, Abu-Jaber must “study” the place before writing about it; and, crucially, what she finds through her studies is something that she describes as “fascinating and beautiful” rather than violent, fanatical or terrifying.⁸ Read in this way, *Crescent* is a liberal account of a nation officially inscribed as “enemy” after 9/11. If, as Peter Kuryla argues, American-style liberalism has typically valorized pluralism, multiculturalist values, individual rights and polemical politics, *Crescent* is a text that is concerned about how to proceed with this agenda in a representational sense within the neo-conservative political-cultural context in which it is published, an environment in which Kuryla argues “liberalism has become a bad word,” a kind of apology for terrorism.⁹

Readings like Field’s and Abu-Jaber’s are not categorically incorrect, for *Crescent* does indeed find a place amongst the post-9/11 surge of products associated with the nations, cultures, languages and faiths of Islam, the popularity of which indicates a liberal fascination that is “the flip-side of both Islamaphobia and Islamic discontent.”¹⁰ However, to read *Crescent* as just an “Iraqi” or “Arabic” novel is to neglect the series of tensions and uncertainties produced by its narrative structure. For *Crescent* provides no authoritative narrative voice, but instead relies on a form of third-person narration that relays scenes, attitudes and understandings of its action through its characters’ eyes. In fact, the novel does not represent Iraq at all, but rather represents its characters representing it. Han indeed describes the villages, orchards, kitchens and cafes Field discusses, telling Sirine about men working in the “few acres of orchard land where [his family] grew lemons, figs and olives,” his nocturnal meetings with friends to discuss economics and foreign policy, and his mother, sister and female neighbors “patting dough ... all of them laughing and telling stories.”¹¹ These cannot, though, be taken as straightforward representations of Iraq, as Field reads them, because they are filtered through Han’s words and memories. Ironically in statements like that quoted above, Abu-Jaber herself also neglects the complexity of her own text by suggesting that it offers knowledge about Iraq rather than problematizes such knowledge.¹²

Whatever Abu-Jaber may think of her own work, *Crescent* is a conflicted novel that presents an exoticized representation of culture through its depiction of food, and yet cannot seem to wholly abandon itself to its own systems of exoticism. It is, in one way, a self-consciously postmodern novel that is not so much “about” Iraq or Arabic culture as much as it is about the inherent distortions and problems that occur within its characters’—and by implication, its own—acts of representation. Much of the novel’s energy in this regard is directed towards the representation of images, particularly those relating to the first Gulf War. While its characters wish to access “real” knowledge about place, the novel uses its representations of images to suggest that texts of any kind—be they imagistic, linguistic or culinary—yield confusing and

unreliable information. There are numerous examples throughout the novel, but perhaps the most evocative is a photographic exhibition depicted in the novel, “Photography against Art: Real Seens by Nathan Green” that is held in conjunction with a poetry reading by a Syrian poet. Consisting of black-and-white matted prints, the exhibition is used by the text to undermine the touristic notion of the “real” that features in the exhibition title. Indeed, the photographs are represented as portals into a world with only the most tenuous connection to “reality”:

Sirine realizes that these are portraits of people in varying degrees of distress or agitation: blurred heads turning away, hands fluttering up in evasion, some appear to be outright laughing or shouting ... One image ... looks a little like a drowning man trapped beneath the camera lens, his mouth smeared and open, his eyes streaks ... The image slips inside her, cold, like swallowed tears.¹³

The exhibition may claim to represent “real scenes” that the photographer, a young man who has toured throughout the Middle East, has himself “seen,” but the text suggests here that the inherent ambiguity of the images, here literalized in blurs, smears and streaks, results in an interpretation that has only hypothetical value. Sirine “realizes” that the images show people in distress, but the text relativizes this so-called realization by refusing to provide an authoritative view of the images: Sirine’s interpretation is unreliable because she cannot even ascertain whether the subjects are shouting or laughing; another may look to her “a little like a drowning man,” but what exactly is taking place in the photographs is never revealed. Instead, the text separates its implied reader from the “real” by several degrees: *Crescent* contains what *may be* violence in a photograph that is only seen through a character’s eyes. In this sense, *Crescent* is a very American novel, for it draws on influential postmodern discussions of American culture by theorists such as Umberto Eco who regards America as a “hyperreal” environment—an environment in which images contain greater validity than the “real”; and Jean Baudrillard who argues that the Gulf War was more of a media event than a “real” one insofar as simulations and copies were reproduced on television screens to the point that the reality of the war was obscured by the profusion of images.¹⁴ This is a novel that ostentatiously draws on American postmodern discourse, replete as it is with blurry, “scribbled” photographs and television screens on which stories have “no beginning and no end, no boundaries, sliding—as the news does on the screen—from Iraq to Bosnia to Ireland to Palestine.”¹⁵

Crescent’s representation of food is vitally linked to its postmodern interrogation of the stability of images. If, as Barthes wrote in the 1980s, images are not “transparent windows” or containers that captured the world for the gaze, *Crescent* extends its postmodern destabilization of representational truth beyond the domain of the visual to problematize food as a “cultural container.”¹⁶ Read as a

postmodern, self-conscious text, *Crescent* critically examines its characters' engagement with stereotypes, a mode of cultural interaction which Homi Bhabha argues is always afflicted by anxiety. According to Bhabha, stereotyping is by definition a conflicted, unstable form of identification, a "form of knowledge that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated"; anxieties arise from subliminal questions about the validity of knowledge, and from fears that that which is supposedly known may not be known at all.¹⁷ The text's representations of culinary tourism show its characters to be afflicted by anxieties about their lack of knowledge regarding Arabic culture and show that various stereotypical forms of knowledge only partially compensate for this lack. I will show in what follows that they approach food as a way of quelling their anxiety about their own approach to culture, but the unreliability of food as text means that this anxiety is never fully assuaged.

While *Crescent* possesses elements of postmodern self-consciousness, though, its narrative structure makes it difficult to determine whether the novel is seeking to destabilize its representations of exoticized culture or whether it is in fact uncritically invested in those representations. Put another way, it is not clear whether the novel itself is informed by a lucid understanding of its own relativized message, or whether its postmodern removal of representational reliability from the implied reader is a convenient screen behind which to hide its own uncertainties. The text possesses a tenuous grip on its own postmodern reflexivity and its project of representational destabilization. It may critique its characters' investment in exoticism at the level of content, but the florid language and imagery it uses in its representations of food reveal its reliance upon the same discourses of exoticism it critiques, and possession by the same kinds of anxieties about Arabic culture that afflict its characters.¹⁸ Its representations of food are severed from a geographical setting, but they nevertheless link the culinary realm to romantic figurations of the exotic, specifically the Orientalist stereotypes that conceptualize the Orient, as Said puts it in the opening sentences of *Orientalism*, as a land of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."¹⁹ *Crescent's* symbolically heavy use of food—what Nouri Gana calls its "cuisine multiculturalism"—demonstrates that this novel is, through its formal features, bound to an essentialist conceptualization of an exotic Arab culture. The text's deification of eating as a liberal political act and its subliminal longing for connection with a romantic, exotic terrain interact in complex ways with the wider political and cultural currents shaping American responses to 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While it oscillates backwards and forwards between critique and credulousness, between critically reflecting upon the liberal anxiety that informs its characters' culinary touristic practices and being gripped by that anxiety itself, *Crescent* remains an important and distinctive text. This is not because it reveals any "truth" about Iraq or Arabic culture, but because its representations of culinary tourism demonstrate the tenacity of stereotyping and

exoticizing discourses, and, moreover, the inexorable relationship those discourses have with liberal anxieties about terrorism within American culture.

Culinary Tourism, Comfort Food and American Commodity Culture

The culinary tourism taking place in *Crescent* revolves around what Susie O'Brien calls in the post-9/11 context "comfort food": eating to quell anxieties about terrorism. In her essay "On Death and Donuts," she argues that eating American junk foods like Krispy Kreme donuts and Pizza Hut pizza functioned as expressions of politicized action in the days immediately following 9/11:

[The] otherwise guilty pleasure of eating sugar and lard [and other junk food came to suggest] we were somehow contributing to the defence of Western civilization. The Krispy Kreme became as American as apple pie. Not to chow down big time became un-American.²⁰

Crescent's sublimation of anxiety through food functions in a slightly different way insofar as eating is a symbol of liberalism (as opposed to patriotism) that signifies a willingness to accept and commune with the various cultures from which the food supposedly heralds. The comforting quality of food emerges from the liberal function it supposedly performs in subverting political prejudices: in an environment rife with negative stereotyping and suspicions about difference, food provides the individual with a means to demonstrate affinity with the "beautiful" aspects of "different" cultures, including those, like the Arabic culture that Sirine accesses through cooking, that may be directly associated with threat. Lucy Long argues:

Culinary tourism is about more than trying new and exotic foods. The basis of tourism is a perception of otherness, of something being different from individual to individual and from culture to culture, and it can include other times, belief systems, lifestyles, and ways of being, not only other places. ... [Food provides] a touristic entry into another culture.²¹

If, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, culinary tourism "familiarises the new and estranges the familiar," the novel depicts its characters using food as a way to test the boundaries of their own worlds and to traverse new ones—particularly between Iraq and America—a project which becomes politically charged in the post-Gulf War setting in the text.²² Thus, Han serves "broccoli branches, mashed potatoes, spools of gravy [and] sliced pillowy white bread" to Sirine when she comes to his house for dinner, guided by *The Joy of Cooking* and the Betty Crocker cookbook.²³ The act of cooking, the ambiguous third-person narrator states, is an excursion into a foreign realm for Han, "the shift in ingredients [representing] a move from a native tongue into a foreign language: butter instead of olive oil; potatoes instead of rice; beef instead of lamb"

(68). Similarly, the text states that Sirine's life has been full of transient boyfriends who have "always loved her cooking—even the ones who'd never bitten into a falafel or scooped up hummus in pita bread before" (35). Sirine plays the role of culinary guide to Americans, introducing them to Arabic food, as she does when she pours "velvety and green" olive oil from a jug onto a character's hummus and suggests that he "try it like this" (52). There is an entangled web of eating, travel, new experiences and domesticity here. If, as Abu-Jaber states in her memoir *The Language of Baklava*, "food always [turns] out to be about something much larger [in stories]: grace, difference, faith and love," Han's cooking of "American" foods shows that he—unlike so-called "terrorists"—represents a brand of liberal Iraqi open to a cultural experience explicitly connected to America.²⁴ Cooking leads him to interact with other American cultural phenomena such as the institutionalized cookbooks and, by extension, the culture of domesticity they signify. Sirine's food, by contrast, provides the men in her life with access to an Arabic culture defined by domesticity and love, not chaos and terror. In both cases, food comforts by providing a reassuring connection to heretofore unknown realms: stereotypes are subverted and anxiety dispelled.

It is possible to read these representations as straight-forward depictions of cultural communion, but the text in fact strives to destabilize the axiom of culinary tourism—the notion that food supposedly represents the place from which it originates. As a practice, culinary tourism can tend to rely on stereotypical knowledge about "other places" through the association of easily recognizable foods with particular regions: "Japan with sake, Russia with vodka, France with foie gras, Spain with paella, Greece with moussaka, India with curry, or Korea with kimchi."²⁵ The menu at Nadia's Cafe where Sirine works may claim to serve "Real True Arab Food," but the text destabilizes that truth—and with it the association between locale and edible product—by depicting food in postmodern strains as a non-localized and fluid substance that is open to manipulation and subject to different readings and interpretations.²⁶ The food Sirine cooks—"roasted lamb, rice and pine nuts, tabbouleh salad, apricot juice"—is, on the one hand, a "little flavour of home" for the "many exchange students and immigrants from the Middle East" that are amongst the cafe's clientele (19–22). On the other hand, two American police officers come every day to "order fava bean dip and lentils fried with rice and onions, and have become totally entranced by the Bedouin soap opera plotlines" that are broadcast on the TV in the corner of the café (20). The same foods, the text suggests, can be both familiar and strange, depending on who is eating them. The police officers, in contrast to the students, approach food as an exotic stimulus, a starting point for an exploration of Arabic culture that is extended by watching the soap operas. As a result, the notion of "Real True" food of any kind becomes laced with a kind of naivety.

The representations of food in postmodern terms work to critique the liberal mode of politics that implicitly informs the culture of the cafe. The fact that diners of different ethnicities and nationalities gather together under the roof of a Lebanese restaurant that is situated in "Tehrangeles" (the Iranian quarter of Los Angeles) and

welcomes Arabs, Persians, Turks, Mexicans, Taiwanese and Americans of all colors suggests that the cafe is a hub of an inclusive, tolerant multicultural America. Here the Persian owner of the Victory Market where Sirine shops for ingredients announces “that he [is] ready to forgive the Iraqis on behalf of the Iranians”; here the Iraqi students can argue about politics, war and culture in a way that they cannot at home (20). Yet, because the text problematizes the function of food as a tourist portal by showing how the same food can evoke “home” and “foreignness,” the representation of food as a unifying substance—and by extension, Nadia’s Cafe as a hub of multicultural America—cannot be taken at face value. If the characters’ eating symbolically represents their political leanings, the text derides their politics—at least on one level—by suggesting that food does not carry any cultural truth and that, therefore, the characters’ assumptions about connecting and sympathizing with the exotic through eating are deluded.

Instead, the text suggests that the culinary tourism taking place at Nadia’s Cafe facilitates movement towards a culture that it associates with America—specifically a culture of American diversity in which people and products from disparate destinations come together in the American cities opened up by and formed over centuries of globalization.²⁷ The text represents its characters’ imaginary interactions with culture through culinary tourism as something shallow, something akin to what Stanley Fish calls “boutique multiculturalism”:

Boutique multiculturalism is the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals, and high profile flirtations with the other in the manner satirized by Tom Wolfe under the rubric of “radical chic”. Boutique multiculturalism is characterized by its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection.²⁸

Viewed through the lens of Fish’s work, *Crescent*’s representation of culinary tourism unites the characters not as political liberals, but as participants in and beneficiaries of an American commodity culture that includes the “radical chic” items favored by liberal consumers. *Crescent* is centrally concerned with the politics of consumption: it is, after all, a novel that is literally concerned with consuming food. The mode of eating and tasting “other” cultures in which the characters engage is, according to Long, a key facet of American affluence:

A characteristic of contemporary American eating—and perhaps the result of the general affluence of American society—is the treatment of food as entertainment. Dining out, preparing new recipes, attending cooking classes, and purchasing cookbooks and cooking magazines are not necessarily required for nutritional purposes but provide hobbies and entertainment for many Americans.²⁹

From this perspective, *Crescent's* representations of culinary tourism must be seen less as a literary attempt to show the potential for exchange or communion between ethnic minorities in America—a prominent interpretation of the novel thus far—than as a critical representation of ethnic minorities coming together under the sign of American affluence and its mandate for consumption.³⁰

Culinary tourism, then, is a subsidiary of a wider American culture of liberal consumption that the novel problematizes. The liberal politics informing the characters' eating habits extend outwards to other consumption practices like shopping which the text depicts as a vaguely hedonistic activity. The characters engage with goods they imagine to be exotic, but the text suggests they are in fact participating in mainstream American culture:

Han and Sirine drive east on Wiltshire, north or south of Westwood, explore the endless city streets or nose their way into unknown neighborhoods or find the distant, far-flung suburbs and adjacent towns: Pasadena, Corona, Malibu; everything they see is new to them. ... [They] drive into the garment district, down the streets crowded with stalls of clothes and toys and strings of chillies and green curls of bananas, places that Han says remind him of the streets in Cairo. Sirine buys sweet, dense Mexican candies, pastel-colored Korean candies, crackling layers of tea leaves, lemongrass, kaffir leaves, Chinese medicinal herbs and powders, Japanese ointments and pastes. She tastes everything edible, studies the new flavors, tests the shock of them.³¹

If, as Gian-Paolo Biasin argues, food “is quite naturally at the centre of the juxtaposition between scarcity and excess,” this passage represents America as a land of excess where the far-flung suburbs offer products from further-flung countries; here Sirine and Han are consumers who revel in the sheer multiplicity of goods available to them.³² They engage with the exotic through a brand of culinary tourism that melds with commodity fetishism: “everything they see is new to them,” the tastes and smells of products from Mexico, Korea, China and Japan offering the illusion of access to realms beyond Pasadena, Corona and Malibu.³³ In his discussion about the relationship between the exotic and mainstream consumerism, Huggan argues that “the exotic is the perfect term to describe the domesticating process through which commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture.”³⁴ Seen from this perspective, Han and Sirine may imagine that their virtual tourism provides access to places beyond California, but their eating, tasting and consuming are merely evidence of their participation in a “mainstream culture” that is nothing other than a slightly modified version of the American Dream. Inderpal Grewal argues that the American Dream has been translated in the early twenty-first century into an “ethnic and

multicultural version” in which marginalized subjects who may not subscribe to conservative notions of “Americanness” nevertheless subscribe to consumerism.³⁵ The novel’s critical representation of the marginal subjects’ participation in American consumer culture hints pessimistically at the impossibility of consumers escaping the network of global capitalism, irrespective of the politics that inform their consumption practices. The postmodern configuration of food thus works to undermine not only the characters’ culinary tourist attempts, but all politically informed consumption practices by unsettling the connections between consumable product, place and culture. The novel’s culinary tourists are consumers who are united under the sign of multicultural America, a sign which it depicts in caustic tones as being deeply entwined with the capitalist consumer culture that the liberal characters are so anxious to transcend.

While a useful allusion towards the interconnections and interdependencies between apparently disparate consumption practices, *Crescent’s* critical representation of culinary tourism and its postmodern figuration of food hint at anxieties about its own abilities to negotiate the complexities of global consumer culture. If its culinary tourists are some version of boutique multiculturalists and they are oblivious to the ways in which their liberal consumption preferences contribute to a lucrative market geared towards an anxiety-fueled opposition to the political status quo, there is, nevertheless, a vast difference between tasting edibles in a market manned by immigrants and supporting the American fast-food conglomerates discussed by O’Brien. Here the text’s postmodern relativization of cultural essence becomes a way through which the novel is able to hide its uncertainties; in this aspect of the novel, those uncertainties revolve around the relationship between consumption and politics, and the ways in which political opposition might be expressed and practiced in a world dominated by capitalism. Ironic reflections on the culinary tourists’ liberal consumerism go some way towards addressing the pervasiveness of capitalism, for they indicate an awareness on the part of the novel about the problematic implications of expressing resistance through consumption. However, anxiety mingles with the critique: *Crescent’s* ironic representations are an anxious assertion of that awareness, one that it presents in lieu of another alternative.

Romantic Culinary Destinations

Thus far I have discussed *Crescent’s* representations of culinary tourism in terms of its destabilization of the link between food and place. The text manages to maintain its postmodern critique of culinary tourism as long as it is problematizing the assumption that food possesses some kind of cultural essence, that “food can carry us into other realms of experience, allowing us to be tourists while staying at home.”³⁶ However, Long argues that there is another kind of culinary tourism where food is “valuable simply for the experience [it provides], not for where it might lead [consumers].” (1) Food ceases to be a carrier of culture and instead becomes a destination in itself.³⁷

While the text undermines the connection between food and regionalism, its formal features establish food as a portal to an imaginary culinary destination that is governed by somatic sensibilities—physicality and embodied experience. The language, imagery and metaphors serve to idealize and romanticize food as a destination, and inadvertently endorse culinary tourist practices as a tenable cultural pursuit. The language of food reveals the underlying conflict that informs the novel's entire ideological structure: it aspires to postmodern relativity, and yet it remains deeply invested in romantic notions about the possibility of unambiguous touristic interaction.³⁸ The representations of the romanticized culinary destination are an anxious display of the text's appreciation for the "exotic" cultures associated with terrorism, an uneasy insistence on its own liberal politics in an age of stereotyping and discrimination.

An evocative example of *Crescent's* imaginary culinary destination occurs in its representation of a Thanksgiving dinner that Sirine and her uncle host. I quote at length to demonstrate the extent of the exuberance in language and imagery:

Sirine stayed up all night [before Thanksgiving], checking recipes, chopping and preparing. She looked up Iraqi dishes, trying to find the childhood foods that she'd heard Han speak of, the sfeeahas—savory pies stuffed with meat and spinach—and round mensaf trays piled with lamb and rice and yogurt sauce with onions, and for dessert, tender ma'mul cookies that dissolve in the mouth. She stuffed the turkey with rice, onions, cinnamon and ground lamb. Now there are pans of sautéed greens with bittersweet vinegar, and lentils with tomato, onion and garlic on the stove, as well as maple-glazed sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and pumpkin soufflé. ... Thanksgiving dinner is vast and steaming, crowded over the table-top in hot platters bumping against each other. There are three open bottles of wine, all different colors, and there seem to be far more plates and silverware than are actually needed. Among the guests' contributions, there's a big round fatayer—a lamb pie—that Aziz bought from the green-eyed girl at the Iranian bakery; six sliced cylinders of cranberry sauce from Um-Nadia; whole roasted walnuts in chili sauce from Cristobal; plus Victor brought three homemade pumpkin pies and a half-gallon of whipping cream. ... [At dinner] Sirine puts a forkful of sweet potatoes in her mouth. The potatoes are soft as velvet, the gravy satiny. It is as if she can taste the life inside all those ingredients: the stem that the cranberries grew on, the earth inside the bread, even the warm blood that was once inside the turkey. It comes back

to her, the small secret that was always hers, for years, the only truth she seems to possess—that food was better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching.³⁹

It is possible to read this passage as another example of the text's critique of culinary tourism because, in one way, it unsettles the assumption that food is the carrier of culture. Although Sirine begins by "[looking] up Iraqi dishes," the dishes she eventually prepares are hybrid affairs that reflect the nature of the gathering itself—a "Thanksgiving" dinner comprised of eclectic dishes prepared by a member of America's multicultural community.⁴⁰ The traditional Thanksgiving turkey, for example, is filled with a Middle-Eastern-inspired stuffing—rice, onions, cinnamon and ground lamb—and the traditional pumpkin pies are accompanied by "tender ma'mul cookies"—shortbread biscuits stuffed with dried fruit and nuts. However, while the text indeed engages in a superficial postmodern unsettling of food's cultural "truth"—subtly questioning Sirine's belief that food is "better than love: surer, truer, more satisfying and enriching"—the technical features of this passage reveal a collusion on the part of the text with Sirine's perspectives. The culinary world is described in language that casts it as a rich, multicolored space: the greens of the spinach and green bean casserole, the orange sweet potatoes, pumpkin soufflés and pumpkin pies, the brown lentils, roasted walnuts and meat-and-spinach pies, the red cranberry sauce, the tricolored wines and the silver platters and utensils. The multicolored hues are a visual echo of the varied flavors and textures that characterize the meal: savory pies, bittersweet vinegar, the myriad spices (garlic, chillies, cinnamon), the "velvety" potatoes, the "satiny gravy." The culinary world is represented through a series of images that evoke family togetherness: the overflowing table is an image of the family home, the potluck meal a symbol of community, the linking of Sirine's cooking to "the childhood foods" that Han ate an evocation of personal histories, and the night-long cooking marathon a suggestion of food's potential to "bring people together."⁴¹ Most importantly, the culinary world is associated with nature, with stability, with life: cranberries grew on stems, the earth is contained inside the bread, the turkey was once warm with living blood. Food is a portal to a world characterized by flavor, color and community, one that is bound to physicality and earthiness.

The language and imagery used in the Thanksgiving scene demonstrate the tenuous hold that *Crescent* possesses over its own critique of culinary tourism throughout. The representation of the hybrid meal may challenge notions of food's cultural essence, but the novel nevertheless constructs an exoticized realm of taste through its description of food: food ceases to be a vehicle in the tourists' experience, and becomes instead the arrival point, the destination. The language of food is similar throughout the novel, even in the passages that are overtly critical of culinary tourist practices. In the critical representation of Han's "American" dinner party, for instance, food is described in flowery language that coverts mundane edibles into exotic products: plain bread becomes "sliced pillowy white bread," and glasses of wine

become “round goblets of crimson wine.”⁴² Elsewhere, raw meat is described as possessing “a fresh bloom of marbling and blood”; stuffed grape leaves are described as “tender, garlicky, meaty packages”; and knaffea is a pastry “fragrant with brown spices, and layered with nuts and sugars and cheese.”⁴³ The colorful language and proliferation of adjectives establish food as a lush imaginary place in its own right and hint at the text’s investment in multiple entwined stereotypical discourses.

The most significant of these are two entangled Romantic ideologies: Orientalism and a privileging of embodied experience. The representation of culinary tourism reveals the text’s investment in the kinds of ideas first espoused by the Romantic “cult of taste,” a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century movement that privileged somatic sensual experience—smell, touch and especially taste—over visual or auditory experience, believing that the somatic senses provided a “truer” interaction. Denise Gigante summarizes the perspectives of Romantic taste enthusiasts:

The aesthetic field of vision and hearing may yield a vaguely ideal-immature subjectivity, but the senses of touch, taste and smell demand an actual self engaged in the world of material presence. ... Taste, understood in its fullest sense as a gustatory mode of aesthetic experience, is a way out of abstraction and into a robust sensibility.⁴⁴

Connected to these somatic ideals are colonial and especially Orientalist discourses which dichotomize the East with the West on the basis of eroticism and connections with the natural world. It is not just, as I have discussed above, that the culinary world is represented as possessing a link to the physical world (cranberries to stems, bread to earth, turkeys to blood), although this in itself ties the representation of the culinary world to colonial discourses which conceptualized the colonies as “natural” environments and colonial subjects as being closer to nature than the colonizers.⁴⁵ More problematically, the text binds its representations of food to Sirine’s sexual experience of Han’s Iraqi body, a move that establishes an explicit link between its imaginary culinary destination and erotic conceptualizations of the Orient. The title of *Crescent* hints at the outset that the association between cultural and sexual experience is a central concern of the text. Since Han has a crescent-shaped scar above one of his eyebrows, a mark that suggests the text conceives of him as a representative of Islam and Iraq in particular, the implication is that Sirine gains knowledge of Islam and Iraq through her physical interaction with the body that is symbolically linked to the culture signified by the crescent.

Although this may suggest that it is sex and not food that is the text’s privileged form of somatic experience, the two are inseparable in *Crescent*. Indeed, the smells, colors and tastes of ingredients inform Sirine’s desire for Han’s physical body:

Sirine often shops [at the Victory Market], even when she doesn't need anything—just to sample a new spice or to taste one of Koorosh's imported ingredients, dreaming of new dishes located somewhere between Iraq, Iran and America. ... Her childhood was spent in places like the Victory Market, holding her uncle's hand as they wandered in search of the special flavors that weren't in any of the big American grocery stores. It didn't matter if the shop was Persian, Greek or Italian, because all of them had the same great bins of beans and lentils, glass cases of white cheeses and braided cheeses, murky jars of olives, fresh breads and pastries flavoring the air. And the shop makes her think of Han—somehow, everything seems redolent, brimming with suggestions of Han. When she turns into an aisle full of bins of red and yellow spices and resinous scents that swirl through the air, she is swept by a craving so thorough, she understands finally that she isn't getting sick. It seems that something potent was unlocked inside her during the night, as they shared sleep without quite touching, his breath fanning her face. The intimate proximity of Han's body comes back to her now, the scent of his skin echoed in the rich powder of spices. Desire saturates her, filling her cells, and her sense of reserve instantly gives way.⁴⁶

As in all of the novel's representations of culinary tourism, critique and investment are entwined in this passage almost to the point of being indistinguishable. On the one hand, it is possible to read this passage as a critique of culinary tourist practices: Sirine is presented as someone who is shallow and unsophisticated, someone for whom "it [doesn't] matter if the shop [is] Persian, Greek or Italian" because cultures are interchangeable in her value system. What matters to her are somatic aesthetics: she tastes some imported ingredients, contemplates others (braided cheeses, bins of pulses, jars of olives), and smells the aromas of bread, pastries and spices all with the aim of sampling cultures that are foreign and exotic to her. The implied critique of culinary tourism, however, conflicts with the language used to describe the products' evocations of sexual desire: everything is too bright, too "redolent," "rich" and "brimming with suggestion" for critical detachment. For instance, the language in which the novel describes the spices—colored in brilliant red and yellow hues, their "resinous scents [swirling] through the air"—suggest the novel's collusion with Sirine's perception that "the scent of [Han's] skin [is] echoed in the rich powder of spices."

The association between food and sex is significant in two ways. First, the text's representations of culinary tourism contain subliminal gestures toward a geographical locus of a supposedly non-localized imaginary world. The links between food, sex, and Han's crescent-inscribed body establish food as a portal to a culinary tourist destination that is vitally connected to eroticism and Romantic conceptions of the exotic Orient.⁴⁷ Second and more importantly, the association between food and sex reveals the ways in which the text's representation of culinary tourism is related to anxieties about terrorism. As in O'Brien's discussion of American junk food, eating is both a way of seeking comfort and a mode of political expression: the novel represents

somatic sensual experience as a method of temporarily quelling anxiety and of displaying liberalism. This is most explicitly represented in the depiction of sexual union: if “it seems that something potent was unlocked inside [Sirine] during the night, as [she and Han] shared sleep without quite touching, his breath fanning her face,” that something is a sense of unity, a sense of shared experience.⁴⁸ The implied communion here is entirely at odds with Sirine’s feelings about Han elsewhere in the novel: while he may be charming, handsome, intelligent and successful, she remains suspicious about his past and is affected by rumors that others spread about him. For example, when he returns to Iraq, his students spread rumors that he is a spy for “the C.I.A., the Iraqis, whoever” and that “he [is] one of Saddam Hussein’s secret sons”; these rumors articulate in more sensational terms her generalized anxiety that Han might be involved in some kind of shady political dealings.⁴⁹ If sexual union serves as an antidote to such anxieties, the unification of sex and food under the mantle of somatic sensual experience suggests that culinary experience also potentially alleviates anxiety. Cooking and serving the dishes of her childhood in Nadia’s Café, Sirine is sequestered from the feelings of falling, emptiness and disorientation that she experiences elsewhere in the novel, the fears that are indirectly associated with things that may or may not be taking place in Iraq. Serving coffee to the young Middle Eastern students, she tries to “imagine the word *terrorist*. But her gaze [runs] over the faces and all that [comes] back to her [are] words like *lonely*, and *young*.”⁵⁰ If this generous view of the Middle Eastern men contradicts her suspicions about Han, the text suggests that Sirine achieves the serenity her name implies only when she is engaged in the somatic sensual experience to which culinary tourist practices lead. The text never directly addresses the relationship between culinary tourism and anxiety; yet, in connecting culinary tourism with sex—the sensual activity that is more immediately associated with assuaging anxieties about terrorism—the text gestures towards the comforting potential of eating as a response to fear.

For all of *Crescent*’s postmodern destabilization of food as a carrier of culture, and for all of its self-conscious relativizing of its characters’ liberal attempts to commune with foreign cultures through food, its linguistic and imagistic representations of food as a romantic destination suggest that it is possessed by liberal anxieties about American culture and terrorism that resemble those it critiques. Ironically, however, while *Crescent*’s associations between culinary tourism and liberal sympathy may reveal the novel’s liberal anxieties about America’s relationship with so-called “terrorist” nations, its valorization of eating—consumption—inadvertently works in the post-9/11 environment to endorse aspects of the politics engendered by the Bush administration. In the months immediately following 9/11, the Bush government encouraged Americans to shop as a kind of “fighting back” against the threat posed by terrorism. Like the comfort eating discussed by O’Brien, consumption became nothing less than a symbol of support for the “American way of life”: Grewal argues that to shop was to prove that one was “free” to choose between consumables.⁵¹ Taking part in this aspect of American culture, though, is a fractured

and complex process for ethnic minorities, both within the novel and within the American cultural context, because consumption works to define identity and politics in different directions. In the novel's Thanksgiving scene, for example, the characters celebrate an American holiday, but *also* express their belonging to a non-traditional multiethnic American culture. If, as Xu argues, eating "engenders much of one's emotional tie to a group identity," the novel presents eating as an expression of belonging to a multicultural globalized ethnic community that is bound together through the process of consumption.⁵² Consumption becomes a response to anxieties about terrorism, whether those anxieties are expressed as fears of bearded fanatics—the stereotypes that Abu-Jaber and others imagine *Crescent* challenges through its representations of culinary tourism—or whether they are expressed as liberal insistence about the beauty and "cultural wealth" of the region from which those bearded fanatics supposedly emerge. In endorsing consumption as a response to anxiety, *Crescent's* representations of culinary tourism ultimately endorse a key component of American citizenship, and the unification of minorities through the act of consumption. The representations of culinary tourism in *Crescent* thus interact with wider discourses of American multicultural consumption. The freedom of consumption comes to stand not only for the minority subject's participation in the core values of the American Dream, but also the resolution of anxiety about terrorism.

The novel's reversion to exoticizing stereotypes at the formal level is best understood as a response to anxieties about the validity of its own representation of the fearful and fascinating exotic in an age of terror. It attempts to undermine stereotypical representations, but as it does so, it creates a gap in meaning which it fills in a linguistic and imagistic sense with only marginally modified versions of the same stereotypes. *Crescent* slips and slides between critique and sincerity in its representations of culinary tourism, and it is not always possible conclusively to separate the two. What is clear, however, is that it is a confused novel at cross-purposes with itself. It uses its representations of a culinary exotic to further its postmodern agenda but it is unwilling or unable to free itself from anxieties about the relationship between America and the nations stereotypically linked to terrorism. The text's mobilization of exoticizing discourses ultimately reveals very little about the culture of Iraq. Instead, its representations of culinary tourism suggest that American perspectives—including liberal ones—on so-called terrorist locales are informed by notions of otherness and exoticism that bear remarkable similarities to the dialectic of fear and fascination that have informed encounters with "the Orient" for hundreds of years. At the same time, its formal valorization of the exotic inadvertently acts as a reactionary endorsement of a key component of American culture: the conflation of consumption with freedom. *Crescent's* liberalism is thus inexorably fused with neoliberalism in a way that echoes a wider post-9/11 American cultural tendency to conflate the two. Published in a cultural environment in which democracy and freedom were being gifted to Afghanistan and Iraq by means of military rule and oppression,

Crescent unwittingly uses the exotic to affirm conventional discourses of American capitalist culture.

Notes

I wish to thank Graham Huggan, Hamilton Carroll, Natalie Diebschlag, Patrick Evans and Chris Prentice for their feedback on earlier versions of this material.

¹ The university is not named, but the novel makes reference to Westwood Boulevard, which begins at the UCLA campus.

² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Forward," in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy Long (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), xi.

³ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.

⁴ Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 265.

⁵ Paula Torreiro, *Diasporic Tastescapes: Intersections of Food and Identity in Asian American Literature* (Zurich: Lit Verlag, 2016), 9.

⁶ Robin E. Field, "A Prophet in Her Own Town: An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber," *MELUS* 31 (2006): 209.

⁷ Field, "Prophet," 212.

⁸ Field, "Prophet," 222.

⁹ Peter Kuryla, "Three Variations on American Liberalism," in *American Thought and Culture in the 21st Century*, eds. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 65, 75.

¹⁰ Anna Ball, "Critical Exchanges in Postcolonial Studies, Post-9/11," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30 (2008): 309. In the literary arena, this has been expressed through the publication of texts that purportedly reveal to an English-speaking readership the lives of Islamic subjects living in countries as diverse as Afghanistan, Libya, Israel, Pakistan, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq. The body of this fiction is too large and complex to discuss fully in this essay, but a small list of some of the more prominent novels in this group include Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006) and Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2007).

¹¹ Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* (New York: Norton and Company, 2003), 215, 292, 226.

¹² The novel is afflicted by a series of tensions that reflect evidence of conflicting attitudes in its author. On the one hand, Abu-Jaber is aware of critical discourse: she holds a PhD in English, teaches English and Creative Writing at Portland State University and sprinkles her narrative with references to Said, Hemingway, Whitman, Poe, Dickens and Darwish, to name but a few. Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 24–33; 287–289; 105; 30–31. On the other hand, though, she makes statements in interview that suggest an investment in exoticist stereotypes. In a discussion about the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, for example, she says that “it didn’t even matter that the movie wasn’t even about an Arab per se. It was this artefact that gave a modern American benediction to the Middle East. It made the Middle East look glamorous and sexy.” Field, “Prophet,” 222. Abu-Jaber’s cavalier attitude towards historical and cultural specificity suggest that the novel’s confusions about whether to critique or subscribe to the exoticist attitudes informing culinary tourist practices are, at least in part, products of the author’s own confusions. She, like her text, recognizes the representational dilemmas in products like the film and yet is unable to break free from an aestheticized appreciation of them: “That movie was one of the very, very rare artifacts that said, ‘Okay, this culture, this experience is fascinating and beautiful.’ So I needed to do something with it, but I also needed to comment on it ironically, because it is indeed about a white Englishman instead of a Middle Eastern, so you’re back to where you started from once again.” Field, “Prophet,” 222.

¹³ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 32–33.

¹⁴ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1987, 6–7. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 67. Full discussion of the novel’s representation of images is beyond the scope of this essay, and diverges from its main purpose which is to discuss its treatment of the exotic. In brief, the novel contains numerous depictions of photographs, some taken in Jordan and Iraq by a tourist character, and others contained in newspaper articles. It also shows cascading televised images of current events, especially of wars, disasters and famines. Such images are almost always represented in indeterminate and frightening terms.

¹⁵ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 174.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (London: Fontana, 1984), 5.

¹⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66.

¹⁸ Abu-Jaber’s treatment of stereotyping has been an ongoing point of contention amongst readers and critics of her work; she has a history of engaging with stereotypes in an ambiguous manner. Her first novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), raised concerns amongst Arab American readers on account of its representation of readily recognizable Arabic figures, and was dismissed by reviewers as “a stereotype of a stereotype” and as a “cartoonish characterization” of Arab American culture. Elaine Hagopian, “A Novel of Arab Americans in Upstate New York: Review of *Arabian Jazz* by Diana Abu-Jaber,” *AMEWS Newsletter* 9 (1994): 1; Tom DeHaven, “Matussem Ramoud on Drums: A Review of Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*,” *The New York Times Review of Books*, July 18, 1993, 9. Abu-Jaber has been inclined to explain away criticism from the Arab American quarter as being a product of over-sensitivity and anxiety about the default image of

Arabs in American culture: “Arab Americans have been so maltreated by the media, their image has been so dark, that I think there’s a real anxiety about the artistic representations that are out there.” Andrea Shalal-Esa, “Diana Abu-Jaber: The Only Response to Silencing ... Is to Keep Speaking,” *Al Jadid* 8 (2002): 6. Pauline Kaldas also reads the contention as a product of reception, arguing that critical readings fail to take into account the humor with which Abu-Jaber infuses her writing, that is, that “the novel is supposed to be funny.” Pauline Kaldas, “Beyond Stereotypes: Representational Dilemmas in ‘Arabian Jazz,’” *MELUS* 31 (2006): 169. I would argue, however, that the conflicted readings of stereotypes in Abu-Jaber’s work are as much a function of anxiety in the texts as they are in the environment in which they are read; there is a “real anxiety about the artistic representations” that informs the work itself.

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978), 1.

²⁰ Susie O’Brien, “On Death and Donuts: Irony and Ecology after September 11,” *Cultural Critique* 58 (2004): 149.

²¹ Lucy Long, *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 1–2.

²² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Forward,” xiii.

²³ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 68.

²⁴ Diana Abu-Jaber, *The Language of Baklava: A Memoir* (New York: Anchor, 2005), ix.

²⁵ Anita Mannur, “Food Matters: An Introduction,” *Food Matters: Special Issue of Massachusetts Review* 45 (2004): 212.

²⁶ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 19.

²⁷ By “globalization” I mean the shrinking of the world into a single global space. This shift is expressed in earlier centuries through colonialism, exploration and European expansionism, and most recently through global capitalism.

²⁸ Stanley Fish, “Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking About Hate Speech,” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (1997): 378.

²⁹ Long, *Culinary*, 13.

³⁰ Commentators have read the novel as an affirmation of the global hybridity of American multiculturalism, and one that explores Arab American cultural identity in particular through the representation of food. Carol Fadda-Conrey, for example, reads *Crescent* as an “ethnic novel” that “constructs interethnic bridges [between Arabs and Latinos, for example] among ... traditionally separate ethnic enclaves” (“Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*,” *MELUS* 31 [2006]: 193). Through its representation of food and its Arab American protagonist, the novel, Fadda-Conrey suggests, carves out a space for Arab American literature in the “*ethnic borderland*: a constructive space in which interethnic ties between and within different communities of color could be established and maintained” (“Arab,” 187, emphasis original). For readings that link *Crescent*’s representations of food to knowledge of Arabic culture, see for example Lorraine Mercer and

Linda Strom who fail to recognize the text's layers of postmodern relativity: they argue that "the language of food serves as a way back to ethnic history, culture and roots. Food forms a kind of contact zone" ("Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," *MELUS* 32 [2007]: 39). The food-culture nexus similarly informs the analyses of Ildikó Limpár who argues that Sirine's "most successful strategy to bridge the distance between her two identities [Arab and American] remains cooking" ("Narratives of Misplacement in Diana Abu-Haber's *Arabian Jazz, Crescent, and Origin*," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 15 [2009]: 229); and Brinda Mehta who argues that "*Crescent* establishes the important link between cuisine and identity in which the preparation of food provides the protagonist Sirine with the basic ingredients for healthy negotiations of her mixed-race, Arab American [sic] identity" ("The Semiosis of Food in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. Layla Al Maleh [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009], 229).

³¹ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 185.

³² Gian-Paolo Biasin, *The Flavors of Modernity: Food and the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 14.

³³ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 208.

³⁴ Huggan, *Postcolonial Exotic*, 22.

³⁵ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

³⁶ Long, *Culinary*, 1.

³⁷ I conceptualize the theory of food as destination in a somewhat different way than Long does. For her, food is a destination when consumers focus on the exotic experience of eating as an act independent of geography; this is distinguished from food as carrier of culture, which she conceptualizes as food's potential to connect tourists with the places from which the food heralds (*Culinary*, 1). My theory of food as destination is not just about the physical pleasures of eating, as it is for Long, but is about an imaginary, non-localized space that is formed with reference to a battery of exoticizing stereotypes. In one sense, my food-as-destination concept is still concerned with "where [food] might lead [consumers]" because it leads them into an imaginary space; however, it is different from the food-as-carrier-of-culture concept in the sense that it is disconnected from any real-world locale. For my purposes, food as carrier of culture revolves around notions of geography, as it does for Long, but food as destination is about a space disconnected from real-world referents but informed by *imaginations* about geographical places.

³⁸ Nouri Gana argues that *Crescent*'s "cuisine multiculturalism"—its symbolically heavy use of food—opens the novel to reproaches "of promoting a superficial form of multiculturalism and of failing therefore to encourage the deep understanding of the Arab culture it seeks to reinvent" ("In Search of Andalusia: Reconfiguring Arabness in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 45 [2008]: 244). I account for what she calls the "festishistic and

consumeristic relationship” to food by suggesting that the text seeks, at least in part, to satirize such superficiality through its postmodern representation of food and consumables more generally. Nouri’s concluding comments on *Crescent*’s “cuisine multiculturalism” radically diverge with my reading of its culinary tourism: she argues that the novel ultimately undermines the essentialist notions informing its representations of food, whereas I argue that its formal features demonstrate that it is always bound to essentialism.

³⁹ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 191–94.

⁴⁰ Fadda-Conrey argues that the Thanksgiving dinner both brings together characters of divergent geographical origins and “simultaneously underscores their varied ethnic, national, and cultural identities” (“Arab,” 199). She argues that arguments about politics and culture take place around Sirine’s Thanksgiving table on account of these variations and that this shows ongoing conflict between ethnicities in mainstream America; however, the overarching point in the novel is that, unlike Iraq, America tolerates competing perspectives, even if these cause conflicts, and that, therefore, American multiculturalism is something to be celebrated.

⁴¹ Lynette Hunter, “Editorial,” *Moving Worlds* 6, no. 1 (2006): 1. Hunter’s full statement is “food has a way of bringing people together and also keeping them apart,” (“Editorial,” 1). The text has no notion of the latter half of this statement; it always represents food as a unifying substance.

⁴² Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 68.

⁴³ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 147, 50, 38.

⁴⁴ Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 16.

⁴⁵ Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly point out that the exotics in Africa, Asia and the Pacific were viewed as “primitive” beings closer to animals than humans and thus possessed of animal lusts and urges (“Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure in Asia and the Pacific,” in *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific*, eds. Manderson and Jolly [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997], 7). From the nineteenth century onwards, this view of primitive people was made with reference to Darwin’s theories, thereby locating within evolutionary science the idea that colonial subjects were situated on the lower rungs of the developmental ladder than were their European colonizers. See their introduction to *Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure*.

⁴⁶ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 110–11.

⁴⁷ The eroticization of the male Oriental body here reverses the trend in Orientalist discourse—most famously discussed by Said in relation to Flaubert’s depiction of the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem—to depict sexually deviant or promiscuous women as symbols of the Oriental. The exchange between Kuchuk Hanem and Flaubert, Said argues, produced “[a] widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy and male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and to tell his readers

that she was ‘typically Oriental,’” (*Orientalism*, 6). Relaying the sex scenes through Sirine’s perspective, *Crescent* empowers the female, a move that works in concert with its representation of domesticity as a kind of Arabic female empowerment, but it does so by silencing the erotic Oriental male and casting his body as the site of Romantic, genuine experience.

⁴⁸ It could also be argued that what is unlocked is a sense of destabilizing passion, even lust, given that the text states in the quote from which this sentence is taken that Sirine feels “saturated” by desire to the point of feeling “sick.” However, I would argue that this destabilization is not contrary to communion as the novel configures it: its characterization of sensuality and sex as grounded experience incorporates passion into its idealized somatic realm, suggesting that while being “in love” means to be destabilized by passion, this destabilization is of an entirely different genus than that generated by the postmodern world of images, for it connects the subject to the natural, grounded domain of physicality.

⁴⁹ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 300.

⁵⁰ Abu-Jaber, *Crescent*, 19.

⁵¹ Grewal, *Transnational America*, 218. She also argues that the Bush administration’s instruction was motivated by fears of impending recession.

⁵² Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: Hawai’i University Press, 2008), 19.

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