

“TELL-TALE” WORDS
LANGUAGE AS IDENTITY CONSTRUCT AND
CONSTRUCTOR IN DIANA ABU-JABER’S
THE LANGUAGE OF BAKLAVA

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CHAPTER I

“TELL-TALE” WORDS

LANGUAGE AS IDENTITY CONSTRUCT AND CONSTRUCTOR IN

DIANA ABU-JABER’S *THE LANGUAGE OF BAKLAVA*

Jordanian-American author Diana Abu-Jaber’s¹ memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, recounts in great detail and with exceptional humor the moments of her life that deal most specifically with her experience as a first generation American, growing up in a household with a Jordanian-American father and an American mother. Abu-Jaber’s memoir engages the reader and pulls her into the text; it provides lovely descriptions that lull the reader and allow her to float along the passages. It is in these descriptions of places, food, connections, these beautifully written passages, that the text phrases its problematic approach to identity. In these moments the text begins to reveal its flaws; its language disassembles the concepts of movement and fluidity that the text attempts to construct. Instead, the language—the words themselves—produces a conception of identity as inherited, passed down biologically, located geographically, and acquired through elements presumed immune from social structures such as food or desert winds.

This text exists within a tradition of immigrant or first-generation American memoir, among which are Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Firoozeh Dumas’ *Funny in*

¹ For purposes of distinction, throughout my analysis, I will refer to the author, in her capacity as author, as Abu-Jaber, and I will refer to the persona that emerges through the memories as Diana.

Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America, and Amy Tan's *The Opposite of Fate*.²

These memoirs attempt to integrate the immigrant into American culture, often by putting on display the differences between the “immigrant” and the “American,” and therefore humanizing the immigrant for America. This move—of displaying differences and humanizing the immigrant—in turn illustrates the similarities and connections between the immigrant and the American and brings the two categories closer together. The hope, in doing this, is that the rigidities of culture fall away to provide avenues of malleability, of change; identity becomes understood as fluid.³ Abu-Jaber writes her memoir within this canon, places it among other texts that attempt to diffuse rigid notions of culture and identity, but the language of the text disallows it to engage on this level and, instead, produces a text steeped in identitarian discourse, problematizing the memoir's role among other immigrant and first-generation texts. By attempting to represent culture in *The Language of Baklava* in this manner, Abu-Jaber, rather than engaging in discussion on identity, instead solidifies identity and disengages from the conversation.

The Language of Baklava's engagement with questions of self, identity and culture could be read in the context of the genre of immigrant autobiography, a genre that shows deep investment in and concern with similar questions. As William Boelhower puts it, “In the mixed genre of autobiography [...] the question of identity involves matching the narrator's own self-conception with the self that is recognized by others, so as to establish a continuity between the two (self and world), to give a design to the self-in-the-world,” a move which Abu-Jaber's narrator attempts to accomplish, both for Diana and for her father, Bud (12). This attempt to first,

² These are specifically first-generation American memoirs, a tradition that exists within the larger context of immigrant-American memoirs and includes such texts as: Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), Abraham Mitrie Rihbany's *A Far Journey* (1914), Marcus Eli Ravage's *An American in the Making* (1917), Rose Cohen's *Out of the Shadow: A Russian Jewish Girlhood on the Lower East Side* (1918), and Jacob Riis' *The Making of an American* (1922).

³ i.e. moveable and changeable. I use it throughout the text with regard to identity, both personal and cultural.

merge the two kinds of conceptions of these two identities, and, second, to attempt to produce meaning in this way, creates the circumstances that ultimately allow for the text's identitarian stance to emerge. The immigrant memoir foregrounds eccentricities of the immigrant figure and provides histories that have led to these eccentricities. It explains the ways in which the immigrant has come to be. It tries to provide its reader with a knowledge or understanding of the immigrant. In doing this, the text hopes to engender sympathy for the immigrant. The immigrant memoir attempts to construct an individual figure, rather than a representative figure. It tries to construct a subject, rather than a protagonist. However, Boelhower's following argument illustrates the way in which this attempt fails in *The Language of Baklava*. He argues that "the didactic function of explication and evaluation derives from the typical status of the protagonist. He claims to be a representative self. Therefore, it is at the deep structural level, where the immigrant protagonist functions as an expression of the socio-intellect, that one can find the didactic juxtaposition of two worlds" (12). Abu-Jaber's text attempts to position Bud as this "representative self," a fully-realized subject. But the narrator fails to follow through on this. Instead, Bud is not allowed to speak for himself. He is neither the immigrant, nor the American, and he is ridiculed when he tries to take on either one of these roles. Instead of letting him be a subject who speaks for himself and move as he wishes, the narrator turns him into an over-determined subject, one who is rigid and stagnant, yet liminal, and representative, rather than singular. As a result of his inability to speak for himself, the narrator is now able to speak *for* him.

Abu-Jaber's text explores the difficulties and charm of this childhood experience, and at first seems to do so in a way that discounts the notions of static identity. However, upon further examination, the text's language at almost every turn thwarts the narrator's objective. Though the text utilizes humor at every turn, it lacks the irony necessary to undercut the identitarian language it uses. Rather than presenting an account that allows the characters fluidity, the language reveals that the text allocates to each character an inherited and identitarian past and subsequent identity.

Before we go on to a discussion of identity in *The Language of Baklava*, I would like to take a moment to explore the “two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity,’” as Stuart Hall puts it (223). In his article, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall discusses the process of identity formation within the context of diaspora, specifically, the Caribbean diaspora in England. Hall elaborates on two different conceptions of identity: the first is an essentialized, stable form, and the second—which Hall advocates—is one imagined and constructed. Hall describes the first form in the following way:

‘[C]ultural identity’ [is defined] in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence. (223)

This form provides a stable, comfortable element on which to base arguments of belonging and ancestry, and, according to Hall, it was integral to social and postcolonial movements because it provided an idea that galvanized people into action. Here Hall describes an identity that is formed around the notion of an essence or core, immutable and unchangeable—and though he specifically refers to cultural identity, this formulation can be applied to individual identity, as well. One of the problems with this stance, in addition to its attempt at creating stasis, is that it relegates the outsider permanently to the position of the *other*. Though Hall acknowledges the importance of this conception to social change, he goes on to put forward a far more probable, more flexible, and, ultimately, less comfortable understanding of the way identity functions:

Cultural identity [...] is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (225)

This conception frames identity, both individual and within culture, as always in process, never fulfilled or established because there is no end product. The argument here is that there is nothing to locate or discover in terms of identity, that identity is precisely what we imagine it to be and that that imagination is always shifting. This tenuous reading of identity likely negates the positive social and postcolonial effects of the first form that Hall explains by problematizing the foundations of connections both within and across ethnic lines. On the other hand, it allows for a movement of individuals within culture that is negated by an essentialized identity.

It is within this framework that I have positioned *The Language of Baklava*. The text attempts to establish a discourse on identity, akin to Hall’s second form. It tries to demonstrate a shifting and changing quality to its characters’ identities, seemingly allowing them to exist without the foundational basis of essentialized identity. It does this, for example, by demonstrating Diana’s linguistic—and therefore cultural—shifts and Bud’s assertions of Americanness. But Abu-Jaber’s text falls back on the “collective one true self,” and it is the text’s language that demonstrates this reversion, connecting its characters on the basis of a shared, essential cultural history or a shared positioning as *other*. This positioning cannot be altered or escaped because the definition of identity responsible for the placement causes it to be static or

unchangeable. Because the text forces on its characters this kind of immovable identity and then positions them as immigrant, it consigns them to the role of the outsider, without possibility of shift within their adopted society.

Told through Diana's point of view, *The Language of Baklava* deals with its two central figures, Diana and Bud, differently. The text never seems to question—in that it does not doubt or inquire after—the constant flux of Diana's identity; she is allowed to *be*. In other words, the narrator allows Diana the freedom to move, change, grow, without constantly reproaching her for misunderstanding herself. Likewise, Bud is seemingly allowed to experience this kind of fluidity and flux, to find his own path, and allow his identity to constantly reshape itself. The language, though, reveals that the text folds in on itself, that the words themselves do not support what they are trying to say. Neither Bud nor Diana is finally allowed a non-identitarian existence.

While the text purports to allow Bud the latitude he needs, it in fact relegates him to the role of the immigrant, ridiculed and chastised for holding onto a Jordanian identity that the narrator finds outdated and, simply, incorrect—in that the narrator, Diana, feels that her father should understand that he is not, in fact, Jordanian. Yet, the moment Bud accepts and acknowledges that he is American is the moment Diana turns the scene into a comic, cartoon-like episode. The difficulty the text faces here is an inability to disengage from an identitarian vision.

Alternatively, however, the text approaches Diana's identity differently, attempting to disengage her from designated identitarian parameters. Again, the text's language thwarts this goal and produces the opposite effect. Scenes of revelatory skin colors, desert winds, and town centers that function as originary locations serve to fill the uncertainty and shore up the vulnerability of non-historical, un-inherited identity, one that is constantly in flux, never fully defined.

This reading of the text is far from typical. The scholars who have explored *The*

Language of Baklava have done so through an examination of the representation of food in the text; most notable among these scholars is Carol Bardenstein. Her piece “Beyond Univocal Baklava: Deconstructing Food-as-Ethnicity and the Ideology of Homeland in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*,”⁴ focuses on the connection of food and culture in Abu-Jaber’s text. Bardenstein argues that this “memoir with recipes [...] eschews elevating, exoticizing and privileging the ‘old homeland’ as the locus of originary authenticity, or as the site of unambiguous belonging [...]” (161). One of the examples Bardenstein provides in support of this claim is the scene where Diana’s father and her friend Olga’s “concentration-camp survivor father [...] discover that the other’s food tradition includes stuffed cabbage.” (171). The discovery allows Olga’s recluse father to open up for a time, only to then recede even further into himself and finally commit suicide. Bardenstein uses this un“happy ending” to make her claim that “Diana Abu Jaber not only presents a very different kind of cookbook-memoir, that does not deliver at all what prospective readers (or critics) might expect, but she also presents a complex and fluid configuration of Jordanian-ness, Arab-ness, and American-ness, whose ingredients are not essentialized, and resist settling into a fixed stable form” (171, 168-69). Another example Bardenstein uses in support of this argument centers on the pancake episode, where the Bedouin housekeeper Munira’s comments on the quality of American versus Arabic food spur Diana’s mother to cook makeshift pancakes. Due to the combination of Arabic and American dishes that make up this breakfast, Bardenstein argues that Munira’s “would-be voice of authenticity is undermined” and that what emerges, instead, is a “family embrac[ing] this complex mixture of foods as a new kind of American-Jordanian ‘pancake breakfast’” (171). Bardenstein’s use of these two examples from *The Language of Baklava* exemplifies the disparity that emerges between a strictly food-based reading of the text and a reading that takes into account the

⁴ In addition to Bardenstein, Atef Laouyene in “The Postexotic Arab: Orientalist Dystopias in Contemporary Postexotic Fiction” and Jopi Nyman in “Cultural Contact and the Contemporary Culinary Memoir: Home, Memory and Identity in Madhur Jaffrey and Diana Abu-Jaber” have discussed the role of food in Abu-Jaber’s memoir. Of these examinations, Bardenstein’s provides the most comprehensive exploration of the topic.

revelatory properties of language. In what follows, I will offer an alternate way of reading the passages that Bardenstein explores in her arguments.

Through her examination of the episode depicting the formation of a connection between Bud and Mr. Basilovich (Olga's father), Bardenstein concludes that Abu-Jaber's memoir moves away from stereotypes, whether racially-based or genre-based. What Bardenstein fails to account for in her analysis is the function of language here. Rather than yielding a progressive understanding of immigration and identity, the language produces an idenitarian approach to them. When Diana and Sonja, a friend of hers and Olga's, are discussing Mr. Basilovich, Diana offers that "[m]aybe he's haunted," and Sonja responds with, "Haunted. Sure, he's Russian, he's Jewish. But all of our fathers are haunted. Big deal" (Abu-Jaber 162). When Sonja refers to their fathers, she is referring to a group of immigrant men, whose daughters have become friends. A bit further along, Diana finds herself talking with Mr. Basilovich about the cabbage rolls Bud made and sent home with Olga: "'The skin of your father's cooked cabbage is like a flower,' he goes on, making a poem of cabbage, wrapped up in a meal that I don't remember eating" (164). Later Mr. Basilovich makes his "Russian-Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish" version of stuffed cooked cabbage to send home with Diana for Bud to taste (164). The narrator establishes the connection between the two immigrant fathers here through a common food, and this serves as the basis for Bardenstein's argument, that the text is non-essentializing because Abu-Jaber acknowledges that two different cultures can share a similar food preparation. However, a few lines down the page, Abu-Jaber has Diana make a telling observation about Mr. Basilovich: "He is different from my father, but I recognize something in him. He never seems to be entirely in the room. His gaze is forever wafting over shoulders and seeking out doorways; his is only partially present" (164). Bud and Mr. Basilovich are similar; they have found a common ground. But it is not the common ground that Bardenstein argues for. It is the common ground of immigrants. They suffer from the same nostalgia, the same longing for home. We see Bud's nostalgia coming to a head when his

attempt to buy a restaurant is foiled, but he recovers. In this chapter we see the final effects of Mr. Basilovich's nostalgia. The connection Bud and Mr. Basilovich form, according to the text, is one based on an inability to assimilate into American culture, to leave behind both the good and the terrible memories from their homelands and to allow themselves to accept the changes in their circumstances. Bardenstein has focused her argument on the food itself, but it is in the lines that surround these episodes, that frame them, where the text reveals itself.

Another of Bardenstein's examples surrounds the making of pancakes in Jordan as an answer to the Bedouin Jordanian housekeeper Munira's comment that American food lacks substance. First, what Bardenstein fails to take into account is the shift in immigrant status from her father to her mother. The memoir focuses mostly on Bud, but while living in Jordan as a child, Diana's attention turns to her mother, who is now the one displaced. In Jordan, pancakes become the food of the homeland, cooked and enjoyed in order to recapture something of the past, an attempt at connecting with a displaced identity. Pancakes for Diana's mother, like grape leaves for Bud, become the stand-in for the object of nostalgia. As Bud maintains his Jordanian-ness in America, Diana's mother maintains her American-ness in Jordan. At one point during their stay in Jordan, and two pages before the pancake-making, Diana's mother hears her speaking with Munira and asks, "'Since when do you speak Arabic?'" followed by the narrator's response: "I look at her and I see there is something in her eyes when she says this that I feel in the center of my chest, just under the bone. Instantly, I don't want those words in my mouth anymore" (34). The sense of betrayal that Diana feels here is a response to what she perceives as her mother's inability to let go of her identity as American. Her mother does not specifically state that she does not wish her daughter to integrate herself into Jordanian culture or that she feels betrayed because Diana no longer speaks only English. But Diana reads her mother in this way because she has positioned her mother in the role of the immigrant, forever disconnected from her surroundings. This kind of rigidity on the part of the text appears most notably in the portions that

frame the food scenes. A short while later the pancakes are made, the other dishes are set out, and there is what is termed a “pancake breakfast,” which consists of mostly Jordanian food like “good bread with sesame seeds and fresh hard-boiled eggs and tomatoes warm from the garden, fragrant mint and tubs of rich yogurt and salty white cheese and olives and pistachios” (38). It is telling that the breakfast is still termed a pancake one, rather than an egg one or a cheese one.

Bardenstein argues that this means the text does not favor Diana’s Arabic ancestry, thereby de-exoticizing it and instead putting it on level footing with her American one. Quite the opposite, this demonstrates that the far away culture is the one always exoticized. Diana favors the American ingredient to the meal in the naming because it is the foreign element. It is in this way, through language, that the text reveals its heavily idenitarian position.

Finally—and most telling of the deep-seeded preconceptions of culture and language—comes as a slip on Bardenstein’s part. Just prior to launching into her discussion on Mr. Basilovich and the cabbage rolls, Bardenstein refers to the friendship between Bud and “the Italian immigrant neighbor, Mrs. Manarelli,” except that Mrs. Manarelli is not an Italian immigrant (171). Her parents are, but she was born in Brooklyn (Abu-Jaber 72). This slip seems to be a minor one, but it reveals the underlying position and otherness surrounding the image of the immigrant. Bud’s and Mrs. Manarelli’s friendship takes on import in Bardenstein’s reading of this text, not simply because it is touching, but because it is a friendship between immigrants—specifically. This act of misreading reveals a sort of syllogism-based extrapolation on Bardenstein’s part. Certainly, two people can connect (as with Bud and Mr. Basilovich) on the basis of shared immigrant experience. However, through this slip, Bardenstein makes the argument that any such connection is necessarily based on the fact that the two are immigrants. Bardenstein’s attempt to prove that “Abu-Jaber portrays heartfelt connections *across* ethnic/immigrant lines in the US,” then, becomes problematic when these connections are reduced to formulaic interactions, based on pre-determined similarities (171).

An interesting element of the text's engagement with the question of identity comes out of an examination of the way in which it constructs the relationship of the main characters, Diana and her father, Bud. At the same time that the text insists that Bud must change in order to find a place in America, it argues for a conception of Bud as completely and inextricably connected to his position as immigrant. Diana sees her father as basing his identity on a core, a history that stretches back in time beyond his own lifetime. The text attributes this to the split in immigrant identity. It argues that Bud's inability to move into American culture is a shortcoming on his part, causing a link with a world to which he no longer belongs and, consequently, a total inability to see fissure. According to the text, Bud cannot fit into America because he chooses not to see himself as American but rather as part of an ancient (and imagined) history and tradition. The stories of his childhood have no place any longer; they are merely a way to hold onto something fake. Since the text tries to block Bud into a specific form of identity, it finds difficulty in allowing for the sort of fluidity it seeks, in that any moment of change is then a momentous one, rather than one in a series of moments of change.

Though the narrator would argue otherwise, Diana falls into the same trap as her father, hearing ancestral whispers on the desert winds, and believing in the mythology surrounding the Abu-Jaber extended family. She attributes many of the difficulties throughout her life to a lack of knowledge of where she comes from, although she was born and raised, with the exception of a few adolescent years, in America. She finds her answers, the things that fill in the holes of her life, when she travels back to Jordan as an adult and is able to see where she comes from, where she gets her temper and her gait. Questions about herself are answered for her because she sees herself as returning to her origins.

Near the end of the text, Diana moves to Jordan for one year on a Fulbright research grant. During her stay, her father visits, and they take a trip to their ancestral home in the desert. As they make their way through the Abu-Jaber castle:

Bud steps into an empty stone chamber made sapphire from the filtered light of two lamps. It's like a private chapel. He turns toward the lanterns and the slope of his back seems softened with an irreducible longing. He looks back, hands open like someone in prayer, and says to me: "You see? This is what I've been talking about." (279)

Diana here portrays her father as longing for a different time and identity and believing that he had finally found some evidence of its existence in this building. Here she offers an example of the way her father is, or more precisely, of how she sees him: a man who cannot find peace because he is always searching for something that does not exist, an identity that is not real, according to Diana, not Bud.

A sort of nostalgia—longing—appears here. But it is an "irreducible longing," irreducible, something that cannot be reduced, filtered, or taken apart to discern its component parts, or, more precisely, something that does not have component parts, something that is, in itself, basic⁵. Here the longing is irreducible, undividable, implying that it must be understood as is, that it cannot be deconstructed, that it sits at the core of Bud's identity, this longing. Initially, it would seem that Bud has found the evidence of the thing for which he has longed, the thing he, apparently, has not been able to describe or convey to Diana, the existence of which he can now, finally, *prove* to her. But the argument falls apart in its very construction, even before the text turns a corner in the castle corridors and makes the failure explicit. It falls apart when the longing becomes irreducible, when it becomes basic, that is to say, when the longing first happens. Since the longing itself is irreducible, it does not *become* so; it *is* so. Once it happens, the longing becomes something that is always already there. The very fact of the basic, indivisible nature of the longing means that it cannot be discerned as anything but longing. It is not longing for anything, it is simply longing, the act of longing. Bud here cannot explain what it is that he longs

⁵ I use the term "basic" here to mean primary, indivisible, the element from which something else is made, but that does not, itself, have constitutive parts.

for because there is no *thing*, or even time, that he longs for. He simply longs. He undergoes the process of longing, an irreducible, basic function, something that he has incorporated as a founding element of his identity. Without the longing, regardless of whether it has foundation in or connection to any *thing*, Bud would no longer have this identity that to him hearkens back to something. Again, this object of longing is not something that Bud can explain or convey to his daughter because the object of his longing is the function of longing. And it is upon this function of longing that he has based his identity as an immigrant.

This is how Diana sees her father, as having an irreducible longing, a longing with no object. But can longing become simply a process; can it be experienced, internalized, appropriated *sans objet*? Like desire, longing is a function in itself; however, for it to be conceptualized, theorized, or experienced, there must be an object to which it is linked. The text attempts to argue, when it describes Bud's longing as irreducible, that he does not actually long for anything. Undoubtedly, his longing is for something remembered, as in constructed through the process of memory, something that exists only *in his head*. But the very fact that there is something, remembered, imagined, or otherwise, signals an object of the longing, something on which he can base his longing, which, in turn, is something on which he bases his identity. In order for that to happen, in order for Bud to be able to base his identity on the process of longing, there must be an object of longing in mind. His longing cannot be "irreducible," or basic, a longing with no object for the sake of longing.

Immediately after she presents this scene, this *evidence* that her father feels he has found of those generations of ancestors laying the path he and his family must walk, she turns him down a corridor that shatters any notions of continuity or purity in history:

We turn a corner and the sudden glow of electric lights is jarring, too yellow. I squint, momentarily dazed, my fingers shielding my eyes. [...]

I lower my hand. It is. It's a corridor filled with old-timey desert craft shops filled with possibly authentic crafts like embroidered dresses, glass bottles layered with colored sands, and mosaic-etched china. There are T-shirts that say "I ♥ King Hussein," and "I Kiss Camels," as well as plastic key chains, porcelain figurines, and coin purses embossed with amulets against the evil eye. [...]

"Where did all this come from?" Bud asks. "No one told me about these stores before..." [...]

"Well, there's no escaping Western capitalization," Mai says. "*Viva* American-style democracy! *Viva* commercial exploitation!" (279-80)

This demonstration of how things have changed without Bud's knowledge further reinforces Diana's conception of her father—he is holding onto a world that does not exist.

Holding this image of her father—rather than the image itself—calls into question the narrator's subjectivity. These interactions between Diana and her father demonstrate a sort of ambivalence—the combination and confusion of identitarianism and non-identitarianism—on the part of the narrator. These episodes may also be read as an ultra-identitarian expression: to the point where identity becomes something tangible and definable, even by, and perhaps especially by, someone other than the individual in question. In other words, Diana believes that there is a definite identity for her, something emerging from a distant desert. Yet, she disregards her father's assertions of the same sort, rather creating for him a different identity. In this situation, the frustration she has with him—that might be read as disapproval of an identitarian ideology—becomes a frustration because he does not agree with her about the nature of his identity.

In this way, because she sees his identity as something imagined or constructed by him, it is very easy for her to dismiss it as something less than real. She looks at it from what she considers to be an objective point of view, 'understanding' that her father is somehow lost

because he cannot let go of his ‘imagination.’ The very things she finds fault with in her father are the elements of her own personality that she cannot understand. In the same way that her father constructs his identity, Diana, especially after her adult experience in Jordan, finds that she has become somehow attached to the very kind of identitarian self she faults her father for having.

By always pointing out her father’s inability to move beyond a solidified identity, the text positions Diana in opposition and attempts to portray her identity as one always under construction. For example, the narrator describes Diana’s acquisition of Arabic as a child as “creeping in around the edges [...] like a slow burn eating at the edges of a page,” invoking a violent and certain alteration of the child identity (34). The former is slowly being burned away, and replaced by a hybrid entity, one that speaks both languages. This transformation happens slowly after a period of listening to Arabic without understanding it. The elation at learning to speak “Bud’s language” is immediately turned into a source of guilt for Diana when her mother asks her, “‘Since when do you speak Arabic?’” (34). This attempt on the text’s part to demonstrate a fluidity to Diana’s identity, though, falls apart at moments where she sees her identity as rising out of a specific—ancestral, desert—history. Like Diana, Bud sees his and his family’s history as something solid and entrenched. This is why he has so much trouble accepting what is happening in his family’s ancestral castle; it does not fit with the mythology surrounding the Abu-Jabers. The text, on the other hand, sees his identity—and the *problems* or *glitches* with it—as more than constructed. The text sees Bud’s identity as a choice, a character flaw—in that he has chosen to be the way he is. This reaction—Diana’s annoyance at this perceived choice—signals a disconnect in reading, both in Bud’s reading of his identity and in the narrator’s reading of Bud’s identity. In the dual acts of first, acknowledging Bud’s agency in constructing an identity for himself, and, second, reading that construction as a *mis*-construction, or, rather, a misunderstanding (of that identity), on Bud’s part, the text reveals its systemic problematic

approach to the question of identity. Meaning, the text attempts to advocate a non-identitarian politics, but this attempt breaks down; the text reverts, falls back on, not only an identitarian approach to the construction of identity, as something basic or essential, but on an approach that allows others the agency in determining a subject's identity—thereby objectifying that individual—in the guise of *discerning* an identity for that individual, an identity of which that person is unaware, or, perhaps, in denial.

Earlier in the text, while Diana, as a child, is living with her family in Jordan, she befriends Bennett, the son of an English diplomat, who tries to draw her away from the Jordanian friends she has—namely Hisham—by making the argument for difference. Bennett's attempt marks the moment when Diana 'discovers' that she is, or appears, a certain way:

He presses his arm to mine: His is a gleaming, nearly bone white, dotted with freckles and a faint sheen of burn. Mine is grimy and golden with a telltale greenish cast I'd never noticed before, not till I'd compared myself with someone like this. I'm not like Bennett, and he yanks his arm away as if I've just done something unexpectedly wrong. But in that moment I realize I'm not like Hisham, either. Not dark. I think about the way the relatives come to visit, standing in our bedroom doorway, appraising me and my sisters, the way their words trickle through the air, dividing us. "There's the dark one," they say. "And she—she's the light one... That one is American, that one is Arab..." I'd never before thought to wonder which of us was which. (50)

This incident demonstrates a moment when Diana begins to become aware of concepts of identity imbedded throughout the text. The moment of realization also becomes a moment of questioning, when she begins to wonder about her place between the two worlds. Rather than approaching identity as she often does, the narrator approaches it as a placement in pre-set categories. Though the implication here is that she does not belong in either category of American or Arab, it is the

way that she arrives at this that problematizes her conclusion. For the narrator, it is her appearance, specifically the color of her skin, that places her outside of either world, implying that the 'correct' skin color defines individuals as included in the groups of West and East.

Diana has encountered discussions regarding the identification of skin color with nationality or ethnicity, as with her relatives' assessment of her and her sisters, but it is in this moment that this identification becomes clear to her, and it is then described or conveyed in the very sort of language that causes this identification and classification in the first place. Diana first notices a certain "greenish cast" at the moment that Bennett presses their arms together to force a comparison he feels will bring them closer. This is more than a simple moment of realization or observation. It is not simply a "greenish cast" that Diana notices, but a "telltale greenish cast." At the very moment that she realizes the tint is there, it becomes always there, telltale, something that gives her away, something she wears without even knowing it; but once she knows it is there, it retrospectively colors her understanding of her arm, of her place among the children, among her family. It becomes telltale, a betrayal, a betrayal by her arm of her, a betrayal of herself to others. She can no longer be without being *something*. In this episode Bennett is asking Diana to choose; will she acknowledge that she is like him or will she fail to see that and spend her time with Hisham and his friends? But her arm's telltale quality negates her ability to choose, and Bennett sees this immediately. She is not like him, at least not enough like him when examined closely. But she is also not like Hisham. Which one is she, the American or the Arab? The problematic nature of this question is that it begs an answer; it requires definition and categorization. The text seems to argue that prior to the moment of noticing, a subject is unaware of these problematics; however, it is the "telltale," the always there and always betraying, that turns it around. The quest for the purity and naiveté of childhood that the passage advocates collapses in on itself when the telltale is introduced because the very fact of it negates any possibility of a situation before it. The ability to recognize something as telltale signals a prior awareness of it as telltale. Diana's

recognition of the greenish cast as telltale means that there could not have been a time for her that exists prior to this understanding. This position negates the narrator's attempt to illustrate a moment of awareness or awakening for the child.

Just prior to comparing their arms, Bennett makes the argument that they belong together because, prior to his examination of their skin color, Bennett accepts Diana as similar to him and outsider with him in a foreign world:

"You don't belong with them! You *know* that. You know that. The sort you are belongs with the sort I am. Like belongs with like. Father says. No in-betweens. The world isn't meant for in-betweens, it isn't done. You know that." (49)

Though his attempt to demonstrate their similarities through skin color falls apart, it is this very fact—that she does not have a 'matching' skin color with any of her fellow neighborhood residents—that drives Diana to wish to categorize herself, to belong. It is also at this point—where the child Diana is portrayed as misunderstanding her role or position by stating "I don't know who these in-betweens are exactly, but I feel sorry for them"—that the narrator illustrates a sadness or nostalgia for a time when her position as an "in-between" was yet unknown to her (49). Inherent in this nostalgia is a desire the narrator feels to return to a state of not-knowing, imagined, as it may be, coupled with the realization that such a return is impossible. This implies a specific position, which she inhabits, as neither an insider, nor, entirely, an outsider, in what is often, especially with regard to Jordan as an homogenous society, a theme to which the text returns time and again.

The narrator longs for a time, retrospectively constructed, when, during childhood, she was unaware of these categorizations, the "bone white" or "dark," Arab or American, inside or outside. The function of this sadness or nostalgia is not merely emotional. It serves a double function. It functions as a testimony to an ability to be outside categorization, an ability, which is

presented in the text as *lost* with adulthood. But the nostalgia is not, in fact, a longing for a time before this boundary-less existence is lost, but rather it is a longing for the naiveté that allows the child the ability to not recognize the already-there definitions and categories in which the adult will find herself. In this way, the text constantly subverts its goals. While advocating a non-identitarian position, it turns on itself, unable to accept a conception of the individual, unbounded by the “telltale.”

Nostalgia, likewise, functions in two ways here. First, it functions in the way the text attempts to present itself (as advocating non-identitarian constructions of identity) as feeling nostalgic for a time before definitions and categorizations, implying that it can be possible to exist without these (i.e. a non-identitarian existence). Second, it functions in a way that counters the first, meaning, its underlying argument (the first functions within a superficial argument, a way that the text chooses to present itself). In this second function, the nostalgia is not for a time before categorizations, but rather a nostalgia for a time before the awareness of categorizations. However (and this is where the text’s argument falls apart), there cannot be a time before awareness of categorization because of the “telltale.” The very fact of its existence signifies a prior awareness of it; therefore, the initial awareness is no longer initial.

Bennett’s approach—the argument he uses to convince Diana of his point, the fact that she “*know*”s that she does not belong with the other neighborhood children—also speaks to pre-awareness she has with respect to her skin color and the way it does or does not *match* that of the people around her. Even though the text attributes this scene to the moment of becoming aware, the language of the scene implies something different. The language, in a sense, disassembles the text’s intention. The narrator tries to use this episode to pinpoint the moment the character Diana becomes aware of differences and prejudices, arguing that these things come to her externally, that the child is not inherently aware of these things. Again, here, the language the text uses to make this argument disallows this reading. Bennett’s assertion of prior knowledge on Diana’s part

is a crucial element in his argument. It is this assertion that almost triggers Diana's *memory*, allowing her to piece together the elements of the puzzle—the greenish hue, her family's comments—and ordering them through a discourse she already has—the “telltale” element of that hue, the fact that Hisham is “dark.” The process in question here goes to the crux of the problematic way in which the text approaches the question of identity. The text makes the argument that Diana first understands race, culture, and identity when Bennett first uses it to make a point to her about socialization. The use of the term “tell-tale,” though, reverses this process. Diana first notices this greenish hue when her arm is compared to Bennett's; but, the fact that the hue is a “telltale” one implies a prior understanding of this difference. A thing, or signifier, cannot be telltale without a pre-established structure that relates that signifier back to the signified. The relationship must already be established for the subject before the link between the signifier and the signified can be discerned. Therefore, Diana must already have understood, at the very least, that a “greenish cast” is a “telltale” signifier of otherness, in whatever form—Arabic, Mediterranean, etc. Yet, the text has argued that Diana had, prior to this encounter, no knowledge of what it means to be *other*, or to have differences. If this is the case, then according to the structure of the argument laid out by the text, the only possible conclusion left is that Diana has some sort of innate knowledge of these differences, something that has been there, because these differences have been there, since always. In this way, the text both purports to advocate a moment of acquired knowledge about the question of identity, and, through the function of language, negates this moment of acquisition in favor of intrinsic understanding.

Later in the text, when the adult Diana goes back to Jordan, a friend of hers, Phinny, or Fattoush, as he is nicknamed by her family, visits her. One afternoon, as they take a walk, Diana and Phinny come across an area that seems somewhat familiar to her, as if from childhood.

We stroll down the ancient town center—named after the goddess Amoun, a goddess who really didn't care what politicians and generals and roaming tribal bands said about

her or her fine, rough space. [...] This place feels like a point of origin—one of the fountainheads where the human community intersects with the earth. Outside of a tiny antique bookshop, I stop and place my hand against the faded storefront. [...] My head swims a little, and I wonder if it's possible that certain areas exert an additional gravitational pull. For a moment, I think I have a vivid memory of being eight and standing in this very spot. The faces pour around me, colors of wheat and earth and spice; the sky pulses with something like breath. Finally, Fattoush emerges with his books and my hand falls. (303)

Again, here, the text turns an experience of recognition into one of “origin.” Rather than accepting the disorientation Diana experiences as a instance of *déjà-vu*, the text insists to re-imagine the place, to infuse meaning into it and into the moment of experiencing it. There is an unseen force, the text would argue, a life pulsing through the town center. Again, here food, earth, and wind translate into something living, pulsing from somewhere in history, beyond one's own memory. Here this sensation, or remembering, takes the form of an ancient goddess, imbued with life and breath, and even a “gravitational pull.” Through this rendition and explanation of experience, the text argues that the only way to experience a homeland—in this case, Jordan—one must look to an ancestral, basic, and primal past, something that cannot be thought, but only felt. This anthropomorphizing of place and history implies there is more to the understanding of these elements than people can *imagine*, that these places have an existence apart from the one constructed for them by people; essentially, that they have a life and existence of their own.

In addition to the use of the god figure to bring a place to life and prominence, a largely common trope, this passage subverts the text's proposed thesis—that identity is changeable—when it imagines places, “point[s] of origin[,] [...] fountainheads where the human community intersects with the earth,” implying a spiritual connection with the earth, which makes itself accessible only at these locations. In making this argument, the text basically advocates the ides

that the people at these locations are closer to the earth, more in touch, that there is something beyond the physical that connects the two, people and land, or earth. This argument nativizes and primitivizes those living near these “fountainheads,” in that, by invoking this “origin,” the text implicitly argues for an affirmative (in that it can be positively identified) identity that can be traced back to these very geographic points with a metaphysical aspect.

What happens in this passage is more than simply the text’s argument falling apart or contradicting itself, in that it proposes one view of identity—that it is fluid—and then moves into a different description of it—that it is inherited. To understand the subtler maneuver the text attempts to undertake, it is first important to note that the passage not only acknowledges, but offers, the explanation for Diana’s reaction to the “town center” when it allows her to remember being in the same location at an earlier time. This recognition functions in a double capacity. First, it is offered as the explanation in line with the text’s proposed argument. It allows the event to be read as mere déjà-vu. However, the text’s inclusion of this explanation also allows it to then embark on this identitarian, historically and mythologically-constructed explanation of Diana’s disorientation as symptomatic of a connection with the metaphysical properties of this location. By including the *simple* explanation, the more *accepted* one, the safer one, the text can then move into the explanation it desires; it can move the reader through this hazy maze of gods and living earth and areas of intersection. The text has essentially bought itself leeway to move in mystical directions because it has covered its material bases.

As Bud and Phinny’s stay with Diana in Jordan draws to an end, the three sit in an airport restaurant visiting with one of Bud’s adolescent friends, Mo Kadeem, waiting for Bud and Phinny’s flight out of Jordan, Mo comments to Bud:

“When you came in here...I thought you were an American.”

Bud’s chest rises and his face gleams. “Well,” he says mildly, a bit modestly, “I am.”

A whole new galaxy of suns, moons, stars, and songbirds pops out of the air and starts to orbit my head. My ears seem to be picking up frequencies from Mars. I look at Bud from three different angles. Finally, I take one of the lacy-edged paper doilies and write:

“Today my father said he was an American.” I date it and fold it into my purse. (313)

The text here, again, over-dramatizes the reaction to this event, making of it—comical as it may be—a galactic occurrence, something more than the regular process of identity shifting. Instead, Bud’s admitting that he is an American is an event heralded by the most outstanding of theatrics, very simply, because the text poses it as a theatrical event.

Even in this very obvious moment when Bud insists that he (his identity) can change, Diana still cannot accept that her father is capable of this kind of transition. Her documentation, then, rather than being an attempt to mark a moment, is an attempt to prove that this moment happened, against the possibility of retraction on her father’s part—someone who has *forgotten* previous revelations in favor of a happier outlook on life.

This need for proof simultaneously forces upon Bud Diana’s conception of him and disallows that conception, namely that he is and is not both Arab and American. The need for proof of his Americanness negates the possibility that he can be and has been all along American. At the same time, it forces the label on him. It marks him at this moment, forces him to stand still and *be* something. This act of recording and labeling not only places on Bud a specific identity of “American,” but also disallows for a joint identity, as if, in admitting this on his part and in recording it on Diana’s, Bud has ceased to be seen as Arabic or Jordanian. Through this recording, his identity at this moment, as he prepares to leave Jordan, is made unambiguously American. Only in reminiscences can he relate to a Jordanian identity. His sister Aya says of his illusions, both about his family and about Jordan, “Well, I cured him,” (305). As Bud leaves

Jordan and admits to being an American, he is cured of this illusion, as Diana sees it, that he can hold onto a Jordanian identity.

The text builds to this point through a series of moments that frame Bud as the immigrant, forever inhabiting the liminal space; and language, or its failings, becomes the mode of communicating this lack of belonging. The episode of Bud's failed attempt to purchase a restaurant earlier in the text provides the most poignant example of the seizure of language, the moment when language fails. However, it is not the failure of language for Bud that marks the narrator's attitude toward him, but rather the way in which this seizure is framed. But first, it is necessary that we examine a description of Bud that occurs just before the restaurant scene is elaborated:

Bud is too quiet. He always has something to say. Whether he's happy or sad, cooking, shaving, or driving, he's always talking about something. But tonight he doesn't say a word, just goes straight upstairs to bed. (175)

Throughout the memoir we see Bud talking, telling his daughters stories of his younger years in Jordan, exchanging recipes with neighbors. Bud exists in language. It is through language that the text places him as the immigrant other, citing his accent, idiom, and self-proclaimed nostalgia. This is why the narrator's description of Bud's actions in the restaurant and, more poignantly, her analysis of those actions reveal the text's identitarian position:

He shook, he demanded, he shouted. He threw a fork across the dining room. He grabbed one of the tables as though he were going to run out the door with it. He was outraged, incredulous, but he had no words for any of it. In the old country, he might have known what to say—called upon his brothers and uncles, made threats, called for retribution—but here nothing was clear. He knew none of the American language of lawyers and court and lawsuits. That was only what people said on TV. All he knew was that, here and

now, at the very moment of grasping it, his life's dream had turned to dust in his hands.

(176)

These passages present the reader with an example of perhaps the most significant way in which to see the text's divergence from its proclaimed stance. Specifically, here we see the narrator's stance toward Bud, especially with regard to his identity, emerge, and, again, this occurs through a discussion on language. The passage argues that it is Bud's ineptness in English that causes the seizure of language, but through closer examination, we see that the seizure does not in fact have to do with Bud's English fluency, specifically, but rather with language itself. The seizure is one of language, abstract.

The narrator makes the argument that Bud is unable to hold onto his dreams, that he allows the restaurant to slip from his grasp, because he lacks a fluency in English. Had he been in Jordan still, the narrator therefore argues, he would have had the tools at hand—the language—to ensure his acquisition of the restaurant; he would have known what to say and how to say it. However, according to the narrator, because of his displacement, in location and therefore in language, Bud cannot know what to say. Instead, we are presented with the figure of a madman, one who can only make unintelligible sounds and display emotion through unpredictable, erratic physical fits. He is out of place. He has no support, no connections, no “brothers and uncles” to help him win his dream. He has degenerated. It is, it seems, the loss of communication, the ability to communicate, that has caused this. He cannot express himself in English, the language of this place in which he has no connections; therefore he regresses to this state.

Yet, the passage only a page before attests to Bud's constant existence within language, namely, English, regardless of his mood, “happy or sad.” The discrepancy between the two passages reveals the basic issue in the text, the problematic nature between the first-person narrator, Diana, and Bud, her father. In the narrator's conception, and therefore in every moment

of the text, Bud is first an immigrant, out of place. Any lapses he suffers, any oddities, are therefore always first due to his otherness, his status as outsider. This status again causes the scene in the restaurant to be translated as symptomatic of his displacement, in place and in language. But, the earlier passage negates this reading. With Bud's constant inhabitation of language, English or Arabic, the restaurant scene can be read as—rather than a product of displacement—a break, a schism. It is not English that fails Bud, but language itself. He does not form words at all; he does not fall back to Arabic. He breaks with language entirely.

The text's inability to allow for this possibility, that all of Bud's actions do not necessarily stem from his otherness, that identity and change necessarily interact with and parallel each other, lies at the crux of the text's inability to deliver on its profession that identity is fluid. At every turn its language betrays its assumptions—that there is a core and basis to identity that go back beyond establishment and that inevitably structure and close in the subject.

Abu-Jaber writes a captivating memoir that intertwines food, humor, and family, and it claims to do so in an attempt to demonstrate the formation of a cultural and personal identity that moves beyond the essential. It does not achieve its ends because the text utilizes language that demonstrates an identitarian politics at work. A young Diana asks herself three questions that sum this up perfectly: "What sort of person am I? Where are my loyalties? And who will I remember when I grow up?" (51). The text demonstrates here its position that the child Diana has an identity that she must understand. Placing these questions (in these forms)—"am I [...] Where are [...] will I"—together suggests an equation, in that an answer to one will yield an answer to the other—figuring out who she is will lead Diana to an understanding of who she will be when she grows up. By posing these questions in this way, Diana is undertaking, as Hall puts it, "the act of imaginative rediscovery which [the] conception of a rediscovered, essential identity entails" (224). Collapsing the present and future Dianas into one establishes the text's argument that Diana, herself, is established, and that her task is to discover who she already *is*.

This distinction between an established identity and one under constant construction lies at the heart of the problematic stance this text takes. By arguing for one form of identity and producing its opposite—by employing this bait and switch method—Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava* serves to damage, rather than strengthen, the image of the immigrant as member of an adopted society, and relegates her to the position of *other*, always outside—incomprehensible—because she *is* of the outside.

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Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this thesis is to examine Diana Abu-Jaber's memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, and its approach to the question of identity. To this end the thesis utilizes close reading of passages to explore the relationship between language and identity in the memoir.

Findings and Conclusions: The thesis positions *The Language of Baklava* among other immigrant and first generation American narratives and argues that the memoir claims to present identity as fluid and changeable and that the narrator tries to illustrate the construction of identity based on this premise. However, the text's language fails to support this attempt and, instead, reveals an identitarian discourse. This tension between the narrator and her language is not easy to grasp, and without a considered examination of the language, the text may even appear liberal and progressive. The thesis makes its intervention here and positions itself in opposition to the critics that laud the memoir for its progressive approach to food. Rather than a strictly food-based analysis, the thesis explores an analysis of language to reveal the memoir's underlying conservatism by showing the ways in which immigrant characters are not allowed the promised 'fluid identity.' The memoir defines, speaks for, and speaks about the immigrant figure, who is therefore, never allowed to speak for himself. This thesis argues that such an approach to identity is problematic, at best, and dangerous, at worst. The framework of this paper draws largely on Stuart Hall's seminal piece "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" to position its claims regarding the two views of identity—essentialized and non-essentialized—at work in the memoir.

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