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## CONSUMING ORIENTALISM: PUBLIC FOODWAYS OF ARAB AMERICAN CHRISTIANS

### Abstract

For more than a century, Arab Americans have resorted to self-Orientalism to secure their place in the US multicultural arena as “authentic” others. My essay focuses on the strategic use of self-Orientalist imagery and rhetoric within Arab American Christian communities, specifically at restaurants and church-sponsored festivals. Following the long line of scholars that have mobilized and modified Edward Said’s framework, my use of the term self-Orientalism refers to the ways that Arab Americans have strategically deployed Orientalist imagery and rhetoric as a representational practice within liberal multiculturalism. My essay also intervenes in the field of Arab American studies in two key ways: by arguing for the importance of foodways as site of cultural analysis, and by focusing on how Arab Americans have themselves interacted with and deployed stereotypical representations.



### INTRODUCTION

Elias and Joseph Kirdahy opened a restaurant on Washington Street in New York City’s “Syrian Colony” in about 1913.<sup>2</sup> The Kirdahy brothers, Christian immigrants from Greater Syria, named their restaurant simply Kirdahy Bros. Oriental Restaurant. It was apparently successful, surviving on Washington Street for decades, nestled among dozens of other Arab American owned cafés, grocery stores, linen shops, and dry goods stores. Sometime in the mid-1920s, the Kirdahy brothers changed the name of their restaurant to The Sheik, after the 1921 Rudolph Valentino film of the same name. According to legend, the Kirdahy brothers donned the Sheik name at the suggestion of Hollywood star John Barrymore, who frequented the establishment.<sup>3</sup>

The Sheik restaurant was a prime ethnic destination for New Yorkers, as it was reviewed or mentioned by dozens of publications throughout its existence. One 1962 guide book, *New York on Five Dollars a Day*, said of The Sheik, “Your grandparents will probably remember this exotic Middle Eastern restaurant from the days when it was known

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as 'Kirdahy Brothers' and located on the lower East Side."<sup>4</sup> This review was typical of the manner in which non-Arab Americans portrayed the restaurant: exotic and unusual, but inviting. The restaurant would live on at various locations and with various owners until the 1960s, a long life for a New York City restaurant.

The Kirdahy brothers' success spurred other Arab American restaurateurs to name their establishments after popular Hollywood depictions of Arab countries. The Son of the Sheik restaurant, arguably the most well-known Arab restaurant in New York in the mid-twentieth century, opened in the early 1930s. *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) was also a popular Rudolph Valentino film. Arab Americans would open Sheik and Son of the Sheik restaurants in other US cities, namely Detroit (The Sheik restaurant, 1920s) and Miami (Son of Sheik restaurant, 1932), and Jacksonville (The Sheik, 1965), becoming institutions in those cities as well.<sup>5</sup>

As businessmen, the Kirdahy brothers were capitalizing on the US public's fascination with the "exotic" Arab world. By the 1920s, as cafés and restaurants in New York City's Syrian Colony shifted from serving to more than just the Arab immigrant population, owners began offering menus in English as well as Arabic, and changed the names of their establishments from simply Khalil's or The Ladies and Gents Restaurant, to the Cairo, the Eastern Star, Mecca, and the Arabian Inn.<sup>6</sup> This was a conscious engagement with US popular culture representations of Arabs and the Arab world; a way of grafting the Arab American experience onto the Orientalist legacy of an exotic Arabness, in order to serve "authentic" food in an "authentic" environment.<sup>7</sup>

My essay will demonstrate the long history of self-Orientalism within Christian Arab American public foodways (mainly through restaurants and church food festivals) and claims to an authentic Arabness within US multiculturalism. Building on Nadine Naber's placement of "authenticity" within the context of US multiculturalism, I argue that a constructed Arab cultural identity can be used to make claims to an authenticated Arabness when deployed within the liberal multicultural marketplace that commodifies identity.<sup>8</sup> I use the term authenticated to describe an Arabness (a cultural identity) that Arab American Christians constructed, which was authentic only in that it reflected US popular culture constructs of an authentic Arab.

Arab American Christians are a diverse group. Within Arab American Christendom are Coptic Catholics and Coptic Orthodox,

who trace their heritage to Egypt; Maronite Catholics from Lebanon; Melkite Catholics, who largely come from Lebanon and Palestine; Chaldean Catholics from Iraq; Antiochian Orthodox (Greek Orthodox), mainly from Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. There are also a number of Arabic-speaking Protestant congregations in the US. This essay focuses on the Antiochian Orthodox archdiocese, as Antiochian Orthodox are the largest denomination of Arabic-speaking Christians in the US who self-identify as Arab or Arab American.<sup>9</sup> The Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese is representative of the Arab American Christian experience. The Antiochians share a similar history in the US with the Maronite and Melkite Churches who founded parishes at the end of the nineteenth century, and tended to settle in industrial centers on the Eastern seaboard and the Midwest. Antiochian parishes, like other Eastern Rite Christian communities, have continually celebrated their cultural identity through public ethnic festivals, and have become known for their production and sale of Middle Eastern food in their respective localities.<sup>10</sup>

My analysis of the construction and maintenance of an Arab American Christian cultural identity in the US context takes into account the transnational positioning of Antiochian Orthodox Christians vis-à-vis US military and political interests in the Middle East, homeland events (such as political or humanitarian crises), and US popular, political, and media discourses about Arabs that structure their position within the US multiculture.<sup>11</sup> Antiochian Orthodox have continually constructed and re-constructed their cultural identity in response to this positionality. As Naber argues about Arab-ness and American-ness, which is similar to the scope of my work, these constructs shift and change along with contexts and power relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Another goal of this essay is to intervene in the scholarship on representations of Arabs and the Middle East in US popular culture by analyzing a key component of the production, transmission, and reception of these images and discourses: the complex ways that Arab Americans *themselves* negotiate dominant representations of Arabs and the Middle East through their own processes of self-representation. Arab Americans' self-representations often strategically re-worked US popular culture representations in an attempt to graft the Arab American Christian experience onto the legacy of the collection of folktales known as the *Arabian Nights*, especially Hollywood reconstructions of *Arabian Nights*' themes and imagery. As scholars consider the *Arabian Nights* to be the "single most significant textual

component" of the period that saw the development of Orientalism,<sup>13</sup> in late nineteenth and early twentieth century American popular culture, tales from the *Nights* were often depicted as the authentic version of an Arab past and, in what would become an important distinction for Arab American Christians to maintain, an Islamic past.<sup>14</sup> The Arab American Christians, by positioning their claim to cultural authenticity in relation to adaptations of *Arabian Nights*, through advertising their restaurants and church-sponsored food festivals, engage with US Orientalism in complex ways. The instances of what I call self-Orientalism occur mostly in the context of the commodification of cultural identity in which Arab Americans attempted to claim their share of the diversity market within familiar representations of Arabs as exotic and magical.

Finally, this essay will argue for the importance of public foodways to the Arab American experience. Within Arab immigrant communities, and I would argue especially Arab American Christian communities, eating ethnic food is the most common ethnic-related cultural practice.<sup>15</sup> Jo Kadi, in the introduction to the anthology *Food For Our Grandmothers*, describes cultural identity construction in relation to food and homeland: "Lebanon. I grew up tasting Lebanon and hearing its music, but not speaking and only rarely hearing its language."<sup>16</sup> Many Arab Christians, who may not speak Arabic or have not lived in the Middle East, still know its food well and identify eating it with their cultural identity. Randa Kayyali similarly places food as a main marker of cultural identity for Arab Americans. Kayyali writes that "[s]ome multigenerational Arab Americans describe their Arabic-language skills as 'kitchen Arabic,' meaning they only know the Arabic words for dishes cooked by their family in the home."<sup>17</sup>

#### ARAB AMERICAN CHRISTIAN FOODWAYS

Food and the celebration of food, or what Charles Camp labels the "food event," is a potent cultural form through which to analyze a group's identity construction.<sup>18</sup> My focus on the food festival and ethnic restaurants as food events, allows me to analyze how food and its associated imagery function both as markers of community identity and cultural commodities for sale to the general public. Although recipes, food production processes, and nutritional information may be intriguing areas for studying the cultural production of Arabness, they are beyond the scope of my work.

Arab American foodways, especially the sites of Middle Eastern themed restaurants, *ḥaflī* [party], and festivals carried out by churches, is an important but underdeveloped field of inquiry in Arab American studies. Besides William and Yvonne Lockwood's detailed scholarly work of the Detroit Arab American community,<sup>19</sup> and the small group of literary works about the relationship between Arab Americans and their ethnic foods, there is relatively little attention paid to foodways, unlike within the bodies of literature of other ethnic and immigrant groups such as the Jewish, Asian American, and Latina/o communities. There are two anthologies of Arab American literature and writing that show the centrality of food to Arab and Arab American life, or at least use food as a central theme, *Grape Leaves*,<sup>20</sup> and *Food For Our Grandmothers* (1994),<sup>21</sup> the latter using a "common Arabic food," such as olives, bread, and mint, "to embody the themes" of each section of writing, and also includes a recipe utilizing that food submitted by one of the contributors.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Carol Bardenstein has written about foodways in Arab American literature.<sup>23</sup> There are also dozens of cookbooks both those by scholars and chefs and the many community cookbooks sold by mosques and churches as fundraisers. The plethora of cookbooks also speaks to the importance of food to Arab Americans and food as a marker of identity.

The consumption of cultural identity through food forms the basis of my argument about the importance of studying Arab American Christian food festivals and restaurants as spaces where the public encounters a constructed Arabness. Deborah Lupton speaks literally about the consumption of the other: On the "simplest, biological level. . . we become what we eat." But identity, the "being" what you eat, is also "linked" to food's "symbolic meaning" and "[f]ood may be regarded as the ultimate consumable commodity" and "acts symbolically to define boundaries between Self and Other and constructs a cosmology."<sup>24</sup> The consumption of "ethnic" foods by people outside of that cultural group speaks volumes about the larger context of multiculturalism and its celebration of de-politicized identity. As cultural critic Lisa Lowe has famously claimed, multiculturalism "is concerned with 'importation,' not 'immigration,'" as the US public loves to purchase cultural artifacts (such as food) but only outside of the social and political reality for the peoples who generate and sell those artifacts.<sup>25</sup>

But even within this space, there is some power of negotiation on the part of the cultural groups. If ethnic food "invites [the consumer] not only to appreciate the beauty and pleasure of well-prepared food,

but also to consume the subtle messages embedded within these representations,” then Arab American groups can use this exchange to exact some measure of interjection into the popular discourses that have marginalized and othered Arabs.<sup>26</sup> Even if that message is simply that Arabs have a “real” or tangible cultural tradition outside of media representations.

As early as the 1890s, writers in New York City and other places in the US were venturing to the Arabic-speaking areas of their cities and reporting on the “wondrous” and “exotic” foods they encountered, as well as the people that made and served those foods. They often wrote about these encounters by comparing the ethnic enclaves to the times of “ancient Araby.” Numerous feature articles in the first decade of the 1900s in the *New York Times*, *The Sun*, and the *New York Daily Tribune*, tell all about the strange and exotic delicacies of the Syrian quarter. New York newspapers, as well as those from as far away as Atlanta and Fort Wayne, IN, described the “mysterious” and “Oriental” nature of the Syrians and their food. Using Orientalist language that reflected European imperialism’s exploration and ultimate colonization of Arab lands, the *New York Times*’ 1902 feature on the Syrian community begins: “That explorer who penetrates to the interior of one of the Syrian restaurants....”<sup>27</sup> At the same time that the Syrians were being “discovered” by bohemians, writers, and other intrepid “explorers,” Syrians were discovering their ability to play into the Orientalist rhetoric used to describe their food and restaurants.

The tacit knowledge that they (Arab immigrants) were seen as part of some Oriental legacy by a US public was ingrained early on. In the very first issue of the very first Arab American newspaper, *Kawkab America*, the editors recognize, “It is an undoubted fact that the western man does not understand the oriental as the latter really is, and persists in placing him in an imaginary sphere utterly at variance with the reality.”<sup>28</sup> I am not sure Edward Said could have said it better. But the editors still subscribed to the idea that Arabs and others from “the east” were of an “oriental nature,” even as they claimed that people in Europe and the US didn’t understand that nature. Even in 1892, Arabic-speaking people living in the US understood that they were to be standard bearers of some true Oriental identity. This is the context in which the Kirdahy brothers adopted their new name, The Sheik: the confluence of *Arabian Nights*’ inspired Orientalism, an increased awareness of Arabs as an ethnic group in the US, and a desire on the part of the Arab community to attract a general public to their food establishments.

Public foodways, which I define here as ethnic restaurants and food festivals aimed at a general public (which may or may not include Arab Americans), is a rich site for understanding how an ethnic community constructs a cultural identity. Penny Van Esterik, whose work is based on fieldwork with urban ethnic festivals in the 1970s, writes that "the ethnic food festival is an example of the staging of ethnicity for American consumption."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Lucy Long, noted scholar of "culinary tourism," argues that in the case of ethnic restaurants: "It is about groups using food to 'sell' their histories and to construct marketable and publicly attractive identities."<sup>30</sup> Since foods are not "inherently strange or exotic" but are about the "experience of the individual" (i.e. consumer), "tourism depends on a perception of otherness rather than an objective reality of an item's relationship to that individual."<sup>31</sup> That perception of otherness is most often achieved through the framing of the food (advertising, menus, restaurant names, etc.) in which ethnic restaurants play up their perceived otherness in order to successfully sell food to the general US public. It is within this context that culinary tourism offers power to ethnic groups, as it "[allows] producers and consumers to elevate food from being a mere sustenance to the realms of art and recreation, and therefore tools for the expression and manipulation of social power."<sup>32</sup> In the case of Arab Christians, they can market their ethnicity and frame their presentation of food against the majority group's frame of reference for Arabs and the Middle East. Although the whole of these images and rhetoric may look like an uncritical self-Orientalism, they may actually become a strategic representational practice.

Food, as the "ultimate consumable commodity," and the cultural productions associated with it such as menus, cookbooks, and festivals, offer the "fullest way" of perceiving the other, because it involves so many senses and because food has ability "to hold time, place, and memory."<sup>33</sup> Within multiculturalism, ethnic food and its celebration has become a key commodity and marker of identity. Consuming ethnically "coded" food, is a "long-standing material practice in global commerce and exchange,"<sup>34</sup> and in the US multicultural context, is a depoliticized method of performing and consuming "diversity." In the Arab American context, scholars assert that "perhaps no aspect of culture is so resistant to change, so tenaciously held" as food,<sup>35</sup> and my archival and ethnographic data shows that the celebration of food that is coded as culturally "Arab" or "Middle Eastern" is the main site of Antiochian claims to authenticity.<sup>36</sup>



Middle Eastern themed food festivals are often the centerpiece of the year at most parishes, excluding the celebration of religious holidays of course. These well-planned, multi-day community celebrations create a space of fellowship and fundraising for the Arab Christian community.<sup>37</sup> In areas with historically sizeable Arab and Arab American populations, such as Pittsburgh, PA, Worcester, MA, Toledo, OH, Houston, TX, and the Detroit area, Antiochian Orthodox churches have been holding these annual events since ethnic festivals became popular in America in the 1970s, and often way before. But what may be surprising is that in areas and cities not known for having an ethnic Arab population, Antiochian parishes have routinely held large festivals that successfully draw in large numbers from the surrounding non-Arab communities, such as in Lexington, KY, Indianapolis, IN, Charleston, WV, and Portland, OR. Liberal multiculturalism's focus on ethnic festivals, combined with the long history of fundraising in US churches, helped to make the food festival a viable fundraising option for Antiochian Orthodox churches.<sup>38</sup> The viability of the festival, and in turn the marketing of an Arab cultural identity, also brought visibility, as churches seized on these opportunities for unparalleled publicity of their church and their faith, and rare positive publicity for Arabs in general.

The food festivals and their preparation have always attracted local media who often published or broadcasted lengthy cultural features on the churches: their histories and their unique or "exotic" cultural traditions, echoing the first written features on the Arab American community in New York City. For example, each year that the small but noticeable Syrian and Lebanese Christian community of Altoona, PA, planned their annual food fair, the local newspaper ran features with lead lines like "Something of the unusual this month will be offered to the community in the form of an Arabic Hafli."<sup>39</sup> Another article entices the reader further: "Many Americans, in spite of the space age and jet flight, have never had an opportunity to visit an Oriental country, but on Saturday, Sept. 7 [. . .] a little of the Orient will come to Altoona [PA]."<sup>40</sup>

The articles typically had pictures of the food being served, recipes, or a group photo of the ladies society in charge of staging the *hafli*. The articles used "exotic" and "delights" and "different" to describe Arab communities and their festival. Outside of coverage about wars in the Middle East and their impact on the Arab communities here, the food festivals were one of the only ways these Arab Christian communities could draw attention. And they knew

this.<sup>41</sup> They learned how to advertise their festivals effectively, often sensationalizing their Arab heritage in ways that can only be described as self-Orientalizing. For example, numerous parishes in Pennsylvania and Texas have called their festivals “Feast from the East,” and in the case of St. George Church in El Paso, TX, the name was used since at least 1966. The church in Little Falls, NJ, has used various incarnations of “Arabian Nights Festival” since 1978, and St. Mary in Livonia called their festival “Sahara Fest” from about 2006-10.

Food festivals and restaurants function as “safe” spaces for the public construction and consumption of an Arab American cultural identity. They have also been key spaces for the deployment of self-Orientalism, especially imagery from *Arabian Nights*.

#### ARABIAN NIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF ORIENTALISM

Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, along with the myriad of scholarly works that have sprouted from it or in response to it, is crucial to my project.<sup>42</sup> *Orientalism* establishes the long history of Western knowledge production about a Middle Eastern “other” within a binary framework that continues to operate in US popular and political discourses about Arabs and the Middle East.<sup>43</sup> In the US this Orientalist legacy about the Middle East and its peoples is mobilized in different ways and at different times, sometimes as a culturally essentialist knowledge about Arabs for deployment in popular culture, other times as a means of justifying US political and military intervention in Arab and Islamic nations. Following the long line of scholars that have mobilized and modified Said’s framework, my use of self-Orientalism aims to investigate the ways that Arab Americans re-tooled Orientalist imagery and rhetoric as a representational practice and a strategy for constructing an authentic cultural identity.

As a representational practice, self-Orientalism at times speaks back to popular US representations of Arabs and the Middle East in an attempt to privilege one over others.<sup>44</sup> As Amira Jarmakani writes, “constructions in US popular imagination” have figured the Middle East in various ways, “at times characterized as a backward, primitive region full of squabbling peoples and tribes, at times heralded as the cradle of (western) civilization, or the geographical home of the Christian Holy Land, and at times remembered for its mysterious and fantastical tales filled with genies, concubines, and despotic intrigue, as recounted in *Arabian Nights*.”<sup>45</sup> As the popular representations of Arabs in the US shifted throughout the twentieth century, Arab American

Christians, through their public deployment of self-Orientalist imagery, attempted to consistently reaffirm the more positive aspects of the representations of Arabs, mainly the legacy of the *Arabian Nights* as the representation of an exotically authentic other and the biblical positioning of the Middle East as the Holy Land. Self-Orientalism, at times, also reinforces the more undesirable dominant discourses of Arabs and the Middle East as pre-modern or backwards in the attempt to assert an authentic Arabness.<sup>46</sup>

Especially in the second half of the twentieth century, Antiochian self-Orientalism hoped to claim the authentic cultural Arabness of “ancient Araby,” removing the experiences of contemporary Arabs from the context of US imperial projects in the Middle East.<sup>47</sup> Beginning in the late 1960s, images of rich oil sheiks and *kaffiyeh*-wearing Palestinian “terrorists” were rampant in Hollywood movies, the evening news, and political cartoons, but Arab Americans attempted to privilege a more positive set of representations of Arabs. Though the use of *Arabian Nights*-style imagery was anachronistic and did not represent any “reality” of Arab American life, by self-Orientalizing through “exotic” and ahistorical imagery, Arab Americans could market their food and religion in the de-politicized space of multiculturalism. But at its most critical, self-Orientalism offers the power of selective participation within multiculturalism.

Arab American self-Orientalism is akin to Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism,” especially in the given context of foodways within liberal multiculturalism.<sup>48</sup> Spivak understood that within hegemonic discourses of race, citizenship, and belonging minoritized groups have few avenues for exerting an identity that would circulate effectively within dominant discourses. As a representational strategy, self-Orientalism did allow Arab Americans a chance to speak back to dominant representations of their community by emphasizing the exotic elements instead of the ones associated with potential danger/terrorism. However, as other scholars have argued about strategic essentialism, including Spivak, it ceases to be effective if the self-essentialized identity becomes fixed in the minds of the dominant group.<sup>49</sup> In the case of Arab American self-Orientalism, particularly in a culinary/foodways context, the essentialized identity of Arabs as exotic others is often solidified in dominant narratives, and reflected in the ways that non-Arab Americans write about Arab American ethnic foodways, with words like exotic, delicacy, ancient, desert, fantasy, etc. being used often in restaurant reviews and write-ups about festivals.

While marketing this exoticized Arabness to the general public, Arab American religious and community leaders were simultaneously engaged in politicized action on behalf of the Lebanese and Palestinians, whom leaders portrayed as victims of Israeli's Zionist policies. This politicized action counters the demands of liberal multiculturalism, where cultural groups are only expected to mobilize their difference in the de-politicized marketplace.<sup>50</sup> There is a tacit knowledge of when to mobilize behind a cultural identity, and when to claim a cultural authenticity.<sup>51</sup> And for Arab American Christians, claiming a cultural authenticity typically meant inserting themselves into the popular culture legacy of the *Arabian Nights* and its associated stereotypes.

Michael Suleiman, in his book *The Arabs in the Mind of America*,<sup>52</sup> argues that for the average American, "there is a 'mind set,' a general picture of Arabs, which though vague, is distorted and incorrect and almost invariably negative, at times bordering on racism."<sup>53</sup> His goal is not to discuss the "merits" of the stereotypes, but to show that their deep roots in society make it "easy for anyone hostile to the Arabs to whip up public sentiment against them."<sup>54</sup> Suleiman also points to the *Arabian Nights* as a text that has created a fixed and mostly negative view of Arabs in the minds of the general public. He writes: "Arabs became identified with the book, and the traits and life-styles of the characters in these tales were automatically and repeatedly transferred to 'the Arabs.'"<sup>55</sup> My argument is that Arab Americans have used this "general picture of Arabs" to construct their claim to cultural authenticity.

Suleiman is not the only scholar to use the *Arabian Nights* as evidence of the "general picture of Arabs" that dominates the Orientalist-informed US popular and political discourses. Amira Jarmakani and Sunaina Maira have critiqued the prevalence of exoticized images of Arabs in US popular culture, particularly images of Arab women, such as belly dancers and "harem girls," tracing these Orientalist representations of Arabs back to their earliest incarnations in Western adaptations of the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>56</sup> Important for my work is how both scholars, specifically Jarmakani, show that these Orientalist representations comprise a large part of the discourse figuring Arabs as essentially pre-modern, outside of history, and/or the consummate other. I see the *Arabian Nights* as a ubiquitous collection of texts and images that, through their repeated translation, interpretation, circulation, and adaptation, has helped to construct the US popular culture view of the Middle East as well as the manner in which Arab

American Christians presented and marketed themselves to the general public.<sup>57</sup>

Since its early proliferation of more than eighty English language editions in 1800 to the current plethora of textual versions, including children's books and comics, the illustrations and stories have heralded along the creation of what Jack Shaheen, in the Hollywood context, calls "Arabland," the "mythical, uniform 'seen one, seem 'em all' setting" with harem girls, oases, Arabs on camels, ornate palaces, and of course belly dancers.<sup>58</sup> Robert Irwin also shows how the illustrations and tales from *Arabian Nights* influenced early Hollywood, particularly set designers and directors. Irwin argues that the Orientalist paintings and illustrations for *Nights* editions "were certainly drawn upon" by early Hollywood film producers.<sup>59</sup> Both Irwin and Shaheen argue that following the first enunciation of this Arabland and its "visual clutter of oriental knick-knacks" on film, future directors and property masters throughout the following decades became "mostly autocannibalistic"<sup>60</sup> as the Middle East and its inhabitants were continually portrayed using recycled images, stereotypes, and tropes, basically plagiarizing earlier films, which created the "seen one, seen 'em all" effect.<sup>61</sup>

#### ARAB AMERICAN CHRISTIAN SELF-ORIENTALISM

A striking example of strategic self-Orientalizing is a flyer for a public *ḥaflī* at an Arab American church (specifically Antiochian Orthodox) in New Jersey in 2008. The flyer features an *Arabian Nights*-style palace in the background and the text "Arabian Night Haflī" overtop, with a tagline that reads "Join us for some fun at Palace St. George."<sup>62</sup> There is also an image of a Lebanese dancer in traditional dress and a photograph of Middle Eastern pastries, which highlights that the event will involve music, dancing, and food. The entire advertisement, one that this church used for consecutive years, is typical of flyers from other Arab American parishes. One reason this one stands out is that the main image of the palace is taken directly from Disney's *Aladdin*.<sup>63</sup>

There are two reasons why the use of *Aladdin* imagery stands out. First, Disney's animated *Aladdin* (1992) is a strong example of what Robert Irwin calls the "autocannibalistic" nature of filmic depiction of *Arabian Nights*' tales. The onion-shaped domes of Disney's 1992 version of *Aladdin* are throwbacks to the set design for the 1926 film *Thief of Baghdad*. The production of Disney's *Aladdin* is a striking example of how adaptations of the tales are products of their historical moment

and continue to represent the Middle East as if it exists outside of history. As one scholar states, the Disney version “like many of its predecessors, did not so much bring ‘Aladdin’ to the screen as present a composite of images culled from *Alf lailah wa-lailah* [A Thousand and One Nights] and refracted through a number of intermediaries,” such as *Thief of Baghdad*.<sup>64</sup> The *Thief of Baghdad* (1924) is considered the “first film version of an ‘Oriental tale’” and it is cited as producing many of the stereotypes and “oriental knick-knacks” adopted by later films, particularly the onion-domed palaces of Disney’s *Aladdin*.<sup>65</sup>

The second reason why the parish of St. George’s use of *Aladdin* is so intriguing, is that Arab American advocacy groups took issue with Disney’s adaptation of the story, and not for its unoriginality. Upon its theatrical release, Arab American advocacy groups were furious at the film’s opening lines: “Oh I come from a land/ From a faraway place/ Where the caravan camels roam/ Where they cut off your ear/ If they don’t like your face/ It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.”<sup>66</sup> Jack Shaheen sums up the outcry against Disney by simply stating, “Why begin a children’s film with lyrics such as ‘barbaric,’ and ‘cut off your ear?’”<sup>67</sup> Eventually Disney’s executives cut the “cut off your ear” line for the film’s video release, but left the “barbaric” reference. On its own, these references, particularly for such a popular film, are jarring enough. But as Michael Cooperson argues, the film is part of the context of the first Gulf War, a time when Nabeel Abraham argues that anti-Arab racism and violence “reached an all time high.”<sup>68</sup> Cooperson argues that because of the associations of the Middle East and Arabs with the US-led war against Saddam Hussein, Aladdin and his fellow animated characters needed to be removed from the realities of war-torn Iraq, and thus Disney changed the setting for their *Aladdin* from Baghdad (the site of the first filmic depiction of Aladdin in 1924’s *The Thief of Baghdad*) to fictional Agrabah. The movie also features negative stereotypes of Arabs, such as the Americanizing of the protagonists of the movie, versus the dark-skinned, hook-nosed, thick-accented villains.<sup>69</sup>

Given the anti-Arab stereotyping in Disney’s *Aladdin*, why would an Antiochian Orthodox Church of mostly Palestinian and Lebanese adherents use an image from the animated feature as their logo promoting their ethnic food festival? The use of the image by the parish of St. George was part of the larger history of the circulation of the *Arabian Nights* within Arab Christian circles, and particularly the Antiochian archdiocese. The self-Orientalizing, even through images that were once used to marginalize Arabs and the Middle East as

violent and decidedly un-American, were now being used in a playful way to claim a cultural authenticity.<sup>70</sup> Their strategic use of self-Orientalism is relatively straight forward: utilize familiar reference points to draw outsiders to their event. As the Arab Christians adopted these sometimes centuries-old depictions of their homelands, they were in a sense selling the American public the “Orient” that was created by and through the multiple, contextual, and Western-mediated incarnations of the *Arabian Nights*. As I argue that Antiochians were marketing an authentic or authenticated Arab, I use the term “authenticated” strategically, as in authentic within the bounds of the commodification of cultural identity in US multiculturalism.<sup>71</sup>

As part of their annual Middle Eastern food fair festivities in 1983, members of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church (Pittsburgh, PA) created and distributed a “souvenir book” of recipes, folklore, and selections and illustrations from well-known Arabic stories and folktales.<sup>72</sup> As with most publications by Arab Christian parishes, the booklet also included the requisite advertisements and sponsorships from parishioners and local businesses, the majority of which were Middle Eastern themed. The cover image on the booklet, titled “A Thousand and One Delights: Arabian Nights Entertainments,” was taken from the cover of a 1908 edition of the *Nights* and depicts the iconic frame story of the heroine Scheherazade occupying the King with magical tales.<sup>73</sup> The booklet features a letter on the inside cover addressed to visitors, offering to “instill a little magic in [their] evening, for the flavor of Arabic foods is as vivid, as exotic and enchanting as Arabic dancing; as Arabic folklore in the tales told by Scheherazade to the King for a thousand and [one] nights.” The letter further depicts the Arab American Christians as carriers of ancient Arab traditions of food and folklore: “While we live in the now, in today, our roots stretch back and we constantly draw strength and wisdom from what has gone before, be it a few years, centuries, or eons.”<sup>74</sup> Here, the parishioners construct an authentic Arab Christian cultural identity as a legacy of the *Arabian Nights*.

The booklet for the 1983 food fair connects the food prepared and eaten by church members with the “Tales of Ancient Araby” by juxtaposing stories and illustrations with recipes that “have been handed down from generation to generation from times more ancient than history.” The *Arabian Nights* and its associated imagery of flying carpets, minarets, harem women, and sword-wielding Arab men, has served as a sort of record of a mediaeval, mythical, Arab world. The

Arab American Christians were utilizing that frame of reference to market their cultural identity to the general American public by inserting themselves into the dominant discourses of “ancient Araby,” as the booklet claims, and highlighting how the members of their church are descendants of the Middle East depicted in the *Arabian Nights*, even though they are Christian. Regardless of the fact that the *Arabian Nights* details an Arab-Islamic society and that the mosque is more prominent in representations of the Middle East than the church, the members of St. George showcase what they present as their understanding of Arab culture: one that is palatable and relative to the dominant US Orientalist constructions of Arabs as a romantic, mystical other.

But embedded in this construction of an *Arabian Nights* cultural authenticity is an example of the sustained construction of authentic Christianity by establishing the parishioners of St. George, and by extension the archdiocese, as carriers of the Christian faith that began in their homeland, a.k.a. the Holy Land. The front of the booklet contains an “Ahlah Wa Sahlan” by The Society of St. George, which is an organization at the church with “religious, socio-cultural and humanitarian” concerns. The society proclaims that Antiochian Orthodox Christians “owe their spiritual allegiance” to the “venerable See of Antioch.” The message then states the oft-quoted Bible passage about Antioch, which is also on the letterhead for the archdiocese, that the ancient Syrian city is “where the disciples were first called Christians.” Members of the Antiochian Church see themselves as descendants of the apostles and carriers of the one, true Christian faith. Both their claims to authentic Christianity and authentic cultural Arabness are mediated through the space of the church, which keeps the spirit of an “ancient Antioch” alive, and are part of a commodification of cultural identity.<sup>75</sup>

Making a claim to Arab cultural authenticity from the space of the church is a double-edged sword. Antiochians, as Christians, are given more flexibility with which to shape their self-representation than Muslim Arabs, as Arab Christians have a solid claim to cultural citizenship<sup>76</sup> and can be seen as white ethnics, totally malleable into an American multicultural society. Their self-Orientalizing can be seen as more playful and safe, precisely because they are not the potentially dangerous Muslims that US media and popular culture had constructed. But their self-Orientalization is made more complex in light of their position as potentially more American than Arab Muslims, but less authentically Arab. Especially since, as Paul Eid



argues, “Christian Arabs find that their relation to ‘Arabness’ is mediated by an Islam-laden categorizing frame of reference made up by the majority group.”<sup>77</sup> Their self-Orientalizing, in order to be authentically Arab, has to speak to and through the proliferation of Muslim-themed imagery about the Arab region. This is reflected in the numerous restaurants nationwide with names like The Mecca (New York, Pittsburgh, and Chicago all had restaurants owned by Arab Christians with this name by the 1950s), which conjure images of Muslims for an American public.

Eid writes about the flexibility and complexity that this positioning creates for Arab Christians, as they may be seen as less “authentic” Arabs, because of their religious affiliation. He writes that “the various ways that Arab Christians combine their Arab and Christian identities, depending on the majority group they interact with, constitute a prime illustration of the influential power of outside labeling on minority groups’ self-definitions.”<sup>78</sup> So it’s tenuous to play up the Christian aspect of the identity construction, because although the space of the Christian church is normalized within the US and may attract more outside members to a festival, Islam is more authenticated with regards to an Arab cultural authenticity. As a whole, the festivals and their advertisement are exemplary of the Antiochian archdiocese’s long engagement with presenting itself in relation to the dominant popular culture representations of Arabs and the Middle East.

Self-Orientalism functions to market a familiar cultural identity within culturally essentialist historical processes that are inherently tied to consumerism as a means of experiencing the other, mainly “commodity Orientalism” and liberal multiculturalism. By recycling popular culture representations of the Arab world, the Antiochians were presenting themselves within a familiar frame of reference. In order to draw in as many people as possible to their food festivals, Antiochian parishes had to market in stereotypes. Or in the words of Susan Nance, the Antiochians had to present a “comprehensible novelty” to an American audience, one that offered “new content,” as in a Christian Arabness built on unique foods and exotic music, but “that still flattered preexisting attitudes” about Arabs and the Middle East, namely the referential imagery of the *Arabian Nights*.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, and in a less critical but still important function of self-Orientalism, it serves to capture and construct a nostalgic Arabness using Western-mediated imagery of an Oriental pre-colonial past. Typically these Arab American Christians, many of whom by the 1970s did not speak Arabic or had never been to the Middle East, painted

themselves into the Orientalist fantasy of the *Arabian Nights* as an opportunity to capture a cultural heritage. Their cultural Arabness was created in part by grafting their own understanding of their cultural heritage (mostly through food and music) onto representations of Arabs and the Middle East from US popular culture.<sup>80</sup> In the words of Nance, who is drawing from Phil Deloria, they were “playing Eastern”—constructing an authenticated Arabness, which was authentic only in that it reflected what popular culture constructed as an authentic other.<sup>81</sup>

The collection of Arab folklore was the perfect set of imagery for Arab American Christians to graft themselves onto in order to market an authenticated product to the American public. The *Arabian Nights* tales themselves, as well as their Western translations and interpretations, “weave past and present together in a kind of temporal contact zone,” combining “nostalgic pleasure inspired by an enchanted past with an updated modern amorality, energized by mercantilist zeal, industrialization, and imperial ambitions.”<sup>82</sup> The parishioners at St. George, in putting together their food festival and accompanying souvenir recipe book, tapped into this “nostalgic pleasure” and mapped their own imagined past onto their present.

But how did this work? How can predominantly Arab American parishes, especially in a post-industrial city like Pittsburgh, where the economic ills of the late 1970s and early 1980s could easily be blamed on the media’s “greedy Arabs,” celebrate their Arab culture and heritage and expect the community around the church to willingly support them? The parishioners constructed their Arabness based on earlier, less politicized representations of Arabs and the Middle East. As Ronald Stockton argues about the “essential quality of stereotypes”: “they take people ‘out of history.’”<sup>83</sup> The Antiochians were not creating a “real” Arab with this self-Orientalizing, because they knew who the real Arabs were: the priests and the parishioners of their faith, as well as the other Arab activists, both Muslim and Christian, that they worked with to obtain social justice for their people in the homeland and the hostland.

For example, at the same time that parishes were celebrating ethnic food festivals using self-Orientalizing imagery and rhetoric, there was significant and sustained politicized action and humanitarian efforts on behalf of the homeland. It was not unusual for weekly church bulletins as well as the archdiocese’s official monthly magazine, *The Word*, to report on parish food festivals as well as ongoing political and humanitarian support for Palestine and Lebanon

in the same pages as religious news and debates on theological and doctrinal matters. All were treated as pertinent church issues.

Further, parishes across the country were consistently collecting donations for refugee children from Lebanon and Palestine via the church-sponsored and heavily promoted Arab Children's Relief Fund. Even if raising money to send to Palestinian refugee children was purely a humanitarian effort, in light of US discourses that figure Palestinians as enemies and Israelis as victims, the humanitarian effort becomes politicized.<sup>84</sup> Though this politicized humanitarian action on behalf of the collective homeland was occurring simultaneously as the production and celebration of the food festival, the food festivals remained de-politicized. The space of the ethnic food festival, even in this larger context of anti-Arab racism and violence of the 1970s and the post-9/11 period, was not the space where the Antiochians advanced their transnational commitments to their homelands. They had other outlets. The self-representations that were deployed in the context of the commodification of cultural identity through food, operated in, and were most useful to, the cultural context as a functional self-Orientalism.<sup>85</sup>

Not only were Antiochians savvy enough to separate their continued support for the Palestinians and other Arab causes from their ethnic food fairs, but liberal multiculturalism, which imbues the ethnic food festival with its power, does not allow a space for ethnic politicking. Fitting within this contradiction of multiculturalism, Arab American Christians can market their diversity but must leave their homeland politics at the door for fear of being seen as un-American and equated with the contemporary "political Arab" rather than the liberal multicultural "Arabian." The reconciliation of the Arab Christian's use of stereotypical imagery relies heavily on the contradictions of liberal multiculturalism, which allow ethnics a space in the construction of the national culture, but only within a power structure that continues to marginalize difference.<sup>86</sup> The Arab Christians were adapting images readily available in popular culture in order to sell an authentic product back to the general public who would easily recognize the images of a camel or a sheikh as "truly" Middle Eastern.

There is a long history of this type of representational strategy within the archdiocese, predating liberal multiculturalism. The parish of Worcester, MA, one of the oldest in the archdiocese,<sup>87</sup> held a "Mardis-Gras [sic]" to benefit their parish in August of 1933. The four-page booklet that was distributed to festival attendees lists the activities for the event, the organizers, and a note of thanks in both English and

Arabic.<sup>88</sup> The Mardi Gras had all of the elements of a typical Antiochian ethnic festival: music, dancing, connections to an ancient Biblical and Arab cultural past, and some sort of allegiance to or mention of the American context. The Mardi Gras began with a liturgy performed by the priest, followed by a "Special Prayer for the safety and long life" of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Once all of the pomp was finished, the festivities kicked off with some "Debate Singing," featuring two local Arab signers performing "Arabian Desert Poetry." A "Round Circle Syrian Dance," most likely the *dabka* (that staple of Antiochian festivals), was accompanied by the "old Biblical Sheperd [sic] instrument" (whatever that is). The mention of a Biblical instrument highlighted the Antiochians' role as conduits for their Christian Holy Land. The next two events served to place Antiochian Orthodox within the history of an ancient Arab Islamic culture, as portrayed in the *Arabian Nights*. First was the performance of "Bagdad Music, used in the days of Chalif Al-Rasheed [sic]," which was followed by a "very attractive" "Old Arabian Nights sword and shield play," carried out by two local Arab men. If this was an isolated incident, it would seem curious. But since Antiochian Orthodox churches have continually engaged in this type of imaginative construction of an authentic Arab cultural identity, it offers a rich site for cultural analysis.

Though separated by fifty years, the 1933 Mardi Gras in Worcester, MA, and the 1983 "Thousand and One Delights" food fair in Pittsburgh accomplished similar feats. They both centered the members of the church as the carriers of an authentic Christianity and an ancient Arab culture, allowing the space of the church to be a place of worship, a place of community fundraising, and a place for the creation and maintenance of constructed authentic cultural identity. In both cases, there is an engagement not only with dominant US Orientalist imagery and discourse, but larger historical forces.

In the case of the 1933 Mardi Gras, the presentation of the Arabian Nights "sword and shield play" was in keeping with contemporary US popular culture representations of the Middle East and Arabs as romantic and exoticized others. The members of the Worcester parish were offering community members the same type of commodification of cultural identity prevalent in the commodity Orientalism of the period. Melani McAlister's discussion of the late 19th century development of "commodity Orientalism" as both a challenge to Protestant ethics and a phenomenon that brought the Orientalist ideas of "exhibition," "spectacle," and "foreignness" into the growing consumer culture where Americans could purchase the

other,<sup>89</sup> fits directly with the audience that Antiochian churches were intent on reaching with their self-Orientalism. Finally, because the Mardi Gras was taking place at a Christian church, a familiar referent for community and cultural identity in the US, the representations of Arabs and the Middle East were in a sense translated for an American audience by Arab Christians that were claiming a cultural authenticity. They were “playing Eastern” within the terms of US Orientalism.

## CONCLUSION

At the same time that the Kirdahy brothers were re-packaging their restaurant to New Yorkers hungry for a taste of the exotic, Arab American restaurant owners nationwide were also packaging foods from their homeland in ways more palatable to the US public. For example, as early as the 1920s and 30s, there have been restaurants across the US named either Aladdin or Ali Baba. I would argue that these are some of the most common names for Arab-themed restaurants, reflecting that these are two of the most well-known of the *Arabian Nights* tales (despite their dubious authenticity).<sup>90</sup> In 2010, I conducted an informal, internet-based research project and found a restaurant or café named “Aladdin” in 36 states. With more effort I am certain I could have found many more. Not all of these restaurants are owned by Arab American Christians (some may not even be owned by Arab Americans), but the history of naming Arab restaurants after *Arabian Nights* tales or Hollywood constructions of the folktales can be traced back to the early Arab American Christian entrepreneurs.

The self-Orientalist imagery of church-sponsored food festivals and Arab American Christian-owned restaurants attempted to market a safe and friendly ethnicity to an American public hungry for (de-politicized) diversity. Arab Americans have been successful at marketing their authenticity within the confines of liberal multiculturalism, as they have attempted to solidify a romantic image of Arabs in the minds of Americans (to paraphrase the title of Suleiman’s book), as opposed to the more negative discourses on Arabs, while taking the opportunity to teach the general public about their heritage through cultural symbols like food and music, albeit sometimes in uncritical ways that simply reinforced popular culture discourses. Self-Orientalism is a complex process that says as much about Arab American cultural identity constructions as it does about a US multiculturalism that requires cultural essentialism as an entry fee for participation.

To be Arab American is to construct an identity that is simultaneously part of, but different from, the nation. In other words, constructing a cultural identity is not only about holding onto a homeland identity, but about performing American-ness. Arab American Christians continue to utilize the space given to them by multiculturalism, based on their constructed authenticated difference, to construct an Arabness that is culturally engaging, profitable, and one that speaks back to the proliferation of negative images of Arabs in popular culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, MI, for the use of archival materials and for supporting the writing of the article. He would also like to thank Nadine Naber for her continual guidance and for sharing her work and expertise. Finally, he would like to thank the reviewers and editors of the journal for invaluable feedback on earlier drafts.

<sup>2</sup> In Dr. Nagib T. Abdou's *Medicine and Commerce* (New York: Nagib T. Abdou, 1922), there is an entry for Kirdahy Bros. Oriental Restaurant at 87 Washington St. In Nasib Arida's and Sabri Andria's *Syrian American Directory Almanac* (New York: Aseeb and Arida, 1930), the Kirdahy Bros. restaurant is listed as "The Sheik" restaurant. In 21 May 1934, *New York World Telegram* article it is listed as being at 241 Fifth Avenue, and the restaurant remained on Fifth Avenue through at least the early 1950s, finally ending up on Lexington Avenue in the 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> The Sheik opened in 1913 on Washington Street, and she recounts the legend that the restaurant was renamed after John Barrymore suggested it. Kate Simon in *New York Places & Pleasures: An Uncommon Guidebook* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), 176.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Simon, *New York Places and Pleasures: An Uncommon Guidebook*, 157.

<sup>5</sup> In Detroit, The Sheik restaurant is thought to be the first Arab restaurant to cater to non-Arab clientele. In their essay, "Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways," William and Yvonne Lockwood claim, "For many old Detroiters, The Sheik was the place where their conception of Arab food was created." In *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, eds. Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 515–49.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Hanania mentions that a restaurant called The Mecca, owned by a Palestinian immigrant, opened around 1915 perhaps originally with a different name. Hanania, *Arabs of Chicagoland*, Images of America (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2005), 12.

<sup>7</sup> My argument here is that these restaurant owners were not only engaging with popular culture representations of an imagined Arab past, but were also building on what Melani McAlister calls the “commodity Orientalism” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, where the US public’s fascination with the Holy Land and the “Orient” was commodified through travel books, novels, and silent films about a mythical Orient. *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, updated edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 20–23.

<sup>8</sup> Nadine Naber, *Arab American: Gender, Cultural Politics and Activism* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> According to Richard Jones’ essay “Egyptian Copts in Detroit: Ethnic Community and Long-Distance Nationalism,” Coptic Catholics and Coptic Orthodox in the US do not self-identify as Arab or Arab American as readily as Antiochians. In *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, eds. Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 219–240. Maronite Catholics and Chaldeans tend to shy away from the labels Arab or Arab American, instead choosing to celebrate a national identity (such as Iraqi or Lebanese) or the identity of the ancient civilization (such as Babylonian or Phoenician). See Andrew Shryock and Ann Chih Lin, “Arab American Identities in Question,” in *Citizenship and Crisis: Arab Detroit After 9/11*, ed. Detroit Arab American Study Team (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 35–68. Melkite Catholics tend to identify as Arab, but their numbers are much smaller than the Antiochians. There are complex homeland cultural, religious, and political reasons for these disparities, which remain beyond the scope of this essay, but in many instances Christians from the Arab world tend to shy away from identifying as Arab because of its association with Islam in the US. See Nadine Naber and Matthew Stiffler’s essay “Maronite Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Sunni Muslims from the Arab Region: Between Empire, Racialization, and Assimilation” for a more in-depth discussion of Arab American Christian identity politics. In *Mis-Reading America: Mimicry, Interruptions, Reorientation and U.S. Communities of Color*, ed. Vincent Wimbush (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 208–72.

<sup>10</sup> Although I focus here on the Antiochian Orthodox, similar studies could easily be done featuring the Maronite, Coptic, and Melkite communities. Yasmeen Hanoosh has delved into constructions of an ancient “Chaldeanness” in her work on Iraqi Christians in the US. “The Politics of Minority: Chaldeans between Iraq and America” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008). Amy Rowe has traced a distinctive Lebanese identity among Maronite Catholics in New England in her dissertation, “Lebanese Lives in New England: American Narratives of Assimilation and Ethno-Racial Classification” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2008). Recently Randa Kayyali conducted a study of Arab Christians and their conceptions of a Middle Eastern identity in “Arab Christian Identity in the United States” (PhD diss., George Mason University, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> I have chosen to use the term cultural identity instead of ethnicity, even though I see both terms as useful for the analysis of the contextual articulation of group identity, for two reasons. First, the term ethnicity has been used so uncritically for decades by popular historians, critics, media personalities, and political pundits, that the term has lost much of its power and has often been used as a way of avoiding discussion of race. This point is adapted from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For my work, cultural identity is not a watered-down version of race, but a viable framework for analyzing articulations of racialized groups. Second, ethnicity tends to be used as the "naturalization of group identity," in that the context for the creation of cultural identity is obscured, and ethnicity becomes a "possession of certain attributes," whereas the cultural signals "the conscious and imaginative construction and mobilization of difference." Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 13, 14. Cultural identity, then, is a conscious construction and not a naturalized possession.

<sup>12</sup> Naber, *Arab America*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> Saree Makdisi and Felicity Nussbaum, eds., *The Arabian Nights in Historical Context: Between East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Arab American Muslims have also engaged in similar self-Orientalist strategies through restaurants and food festivals at mosques, but self-Orientalism functions differently in an Arab American Christian context, which I will expand on below. Also, most mosques in the US were not Arab-only, so many of the Muslim-sponsored food festivals had a multi-ethnic element, even if there was some self-Orientalism, such as offering camel rides. Further, Arab American Christians were the first to engage in self-Orientalist rhetoric as a way of grafting their lived experience onto the US public imaginary of an authentic Arab, and Muslim Arab immigrants melded into this discourse.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Eid, in his study of second-generation Arabs in Canada, found that the "most common ethnic-related cultural practice. . . is eating ethnic food." *Being Arab: Ethnic and Religious Identity Building among Second Generation Youth in Montreal*, McGill-Queen's Studies in Ethnic History (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 84. Eid says that this correlates with other researchers, mainly Wsevolod Isajiw, who says that eating ethnic food is maintained more from generation to generation more than anything else. As William and Yvonne Lockwood argue in their extended study of Arab American foodways in Detroit, "perhaps no aspect of culture is so resistant to change, so tenaciously held. Generations after the loss of their mother tongue, ethnic Americans are still likely to be cooking and eating some version of the family's 'mother cuisine.'" Lockwood and Lockwood, "Continuity and Adaptation," 516.



<sup>16</sup> Jo Kadi, ed. *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), xv.

<sup>17</sup> Randa Kayyali, *The Arab Americans*, The New Americans, ed. Ronald H. Bayor. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 84. Compare this with a statement from two individuals I interviewed, a Lebanese-born husband and wife, who describe the parishioners at an Antiochian parish in Pennsylvania, where the majority of the membership is third and fourth generation Arab American. The husband says that to these parishioners "Lebanese history is all about *tabbouleh* and *kibbe*." The wife added, "*Hummus*, too."

<sup>18</sup> Charles Camp, *American Foodways: What, When, Why and How We Eat in America*, American Folklore series (Little Rock, AR: August House, 1989).

<sup>19</sup> Lockwood and Lockwood, "Continuity and Adaptation."

<sup>20</sup> Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa, eds., *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry* (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>23</sup> As an example, see Carol Bardenstein, "Beyond Univocal Baklava: Deconstructing Food-as-Ethnicity and the Ideology of Homeland in Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Language of Baklava*," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 41 (2010), 160-179.

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Lupton, "Food, Memory, and Meaning: The Symbolic and Social Nature of Food Events," *The Sociological Review* 44, no. 4 (1994), 666.

<sup>25</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 87.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato, eds, *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food and Meaning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Syrian Colony of New York and its Characteristics," *New York Times* (25 May 1902).

<sup>28</sup> "Introduction," *Kawkab America* (15 April 1892), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Penny Van Esterik, "Celebrating Ethnicity: Ethnic Flavor in an Urban Festival," *Ethnic Groups* 4 (October 1982), 217.

<sup>30</sup> Lucy Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness." In *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy Long (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Lupton, "Food, Memory, and Meaning," 666; Long, "Culinary Tourism," 21; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, Foreword, In *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy Long (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), xiii.

<sup>34</sup> Anita Mannur, "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora," *MELUS* 32, no. 4 (2007), 28.

<sup>35</sup> Lockwood and Lockwood, "Continuity and Adaptation," 516.

<sup>36</sup> My ethnographic sites were St. Mary's Antiochian Orthodox Basilica in Livonia, MI, archdiocese conventions, food festivals, and liturgical services at a number of Antiochian Orthodox churches between 2005 and 2010. For archives, I relied heavily on the Heritage and Learning Center and museum at the Antiochian Village in Bolivar, PA.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the 1979 food fair at St. George in Pittsburgh, PA, netted the church over 7,000 dollars, which was more than 50 percent of their net proceeds for the entire year. The 2009 Sahara Fest in Livonia, MI, despite the bad weather and poor economy, grossed 50,000 dollars for the four-day festival.

<sup>38</sup> The majority of the ethnic food festivals at Antiochian parishes, at least for those that were not started recently, were begun or intensified in the American Bicentennial era. Festivals that have been around longer typically grew from the dinners that ladies societies started hosting as early as the 1920s and 30s. A search of parish-sponsored websites, church publications, and newspapers in locales with active Antiochian Orthodox parishes, found that at least 10 parishes began hosting yearly festivals during the 1970s or intensified existing ones (such as expanding to a second or third day). Considering that in 1977, there were only 106 parishes in the archdiocese, that number is significant.

<sup>39</sup> "Orthodox Church Plans 'Arabic Half' Night," *Blair Press* [Altoona, PA] (3 May, 1972).

<sup>40</sup> "Hafla to Include Arabic Music, Dancing, Food," *The Mirror* [Altoona, PA] (19 August, 1963). Clipping provided by Michael Farrow.

<sup>41</sup> Many festival organizers tout the opportunity for the surrounding communities to have a positive image of Arabs and the Middle East by coming to the festival. Especially during times of heightened tension in the Middle East, when news coverage is saturated with unflattering portrayals of Arabs, the festivals are seen by Antiochians as an important intervention. For example, following the 1998 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, the organizers of the "Middle Eastern Festival" at St. Luke's in Orinda, CA, said "'In any group, there is a thorn...Not everyone in the Middle East is a terrorist'" (Matthew S. Bajko, "Mideasterners Share Their Fun: and Food: At Weekend Fest," *Martinez [CA] Record*, 17 September 1998). At the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual "Mideastern Festival" in Atlanta, hosted by St. Elias Antiochian parish, which coincided with the end of the intense fighting of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990, one of the food booth operators was quoted as saying, "'We are trying to make the other face of Lebanon visible—the real one. A country that is a mixture of various peoples and nations, a country that is a major contributor to civilization'" (Carlos A. Campos, "City's Arabs Celebrate

Peace," *The Atlanta Journal* and *The Atlanta Constitution*, 15 November 1990). In 2006, during the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon and the associated unflattering portrayal of the Lebanese by American media, Sawsan Awwad, one of the festival organizers of the large "Middle Eastern Festival" at a parish in Syracuse, NY, was quoted in the local newspaper: "'Especially with what's going on over there today,' she said. 'What's on TV is not very flattering to Middle Easterners.'" The article continues, "It's important, Awwad said, for non-Arabic people to know there is a culture in the Middle East, that people in many areas love their neighbors as much as they love themselves" (Dick Clarke, "Homage to Heritage – Middle Eastern Festival as much about Culture as it is about Food," *The Post-Standard* [Syracuse, NY] (20 July 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

<sup>43</sup> Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave, 2008). Jarmakani uses "cultural mythologies" and focuses on the "civilizing mission" of the deployment of troops to Afghanistan, under the pretense of "saving" the women (11–12). Within the US Orientalism functions as a discourse that comes out of a history of European colonial and imperial relationships in the Arab region, especially in relation to Islam.

<sup>44</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 223–79.

<sup>45</sup> Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> My work is similar to Christina Civantos's studies of Arab Argentines, as she argues that Argentinians of Arab descent have strategically engaged with discourses of Orientalism in their literary work, a process she refers to as "auto-Orientalism," in order to insert themselves into, or combat, nationalist logics. *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism, Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). Whereas Civantos focuses on literature as a cultural production, I investigate foodways and its associated imagery and rhetoric. Civantos also looks at other cultural productions of what I would call self-Orientalism, specifically in her profile of former Argentine president Carlos Menem. Civantos argues that Arab Argentines could choose to identify with the more "exotic" and "opulent" elements of an Arabian Nights Arabness as a strategy for intervening in the competing narrative of the "corrupt" Arabs and their dangerous tribalism. "Ali Bla Bla's Double-Edged Sword: Argentine President Carlos Menem and the Negotiation of Identity," in *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora*, eds. Evelyn Alsultany and Ella Shohat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 108–29.

<sup>47</sup> For this analysis I draw from Phil Deloria who writes that "Indianness," as something culturally authentic, was constructed in relation to the perceived

modernity of the American public, especially in relation to Indians and Indianness. In other words, the authentic Indianness was that which was figured to be anti-modern, pre-contact, and existing outside of, or in spite of, the realities of imperial projects of the US on Native lands. *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 101–05.

<sup>48</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 3–32.

<sup>49</sup> Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 75.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Schulman argues that multiculturalism was a response to the rejection of “integration as an assimilationist nightmare” by African Americans, Chicanos, Natives, Asian Americans, and even white ethnics, as they asserted cultural nationalism and difference in lieu of celebrating a “national community.” *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 62, xvi.

<sup>51</sup> Both cultural identity and cultural authenticity are constructed, but unlike a claim to authenticity, cultural identity can be mobilized for politicized goals. For a fuller explanation of how this functions in a specific church context, see Matthew Stiffler, “Orthodox, Arab, American: The Flexibility of Christian Arabness in Detroit,” in *Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade*, eds. Nabeel Abraham, Sally Howell, and Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 105–25.

<sup>52</sup> His title, *The Arabs in the Mind of America*, is a direct response to Israeli-born Rafael Patai’s Orientalist diatribe, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1973).

<sup>53</sup> Michael Suleiman, *The Arabs in the Mind of America* (Brattleboro, VT: Amana Books, 1988).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood*; Sunaina Maira, “Belly Dancing: Arab-Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2008), 317–45.

<sup>57</sup> Naber, in *Arab America*, similarly argues that Arab Americans articulate their cultural identity based on discourses that are available to them in the US.

<sup>58</sup> Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>59</sup> Robert Irwin, “A Thousand and One Nights at the Movies,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 7 (July 2004), 228. See Kobayashi for a brief overview of ‘Orientalist painting’ in relation to the *Arabian Nights*. “The Evolution of the *Arabian Nights* Illustrations: An Art Historical Review,” in *The Arabian Nights*

and *Orientalism: Perspectives from East and West*, eds. Yuriko Yamanaka and Tetsuo Nishio (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 171–93.

<sup>60</sup> Irwin, “A Thousand and One Nights at the Movies,” 228.

<sup>61</sup> Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*. I am cautious about using Irwin here for my analysis. In much of his writing he defends what Said (1978) and Shohat and Stam (*Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, Sightlines [New York: Routledge, 1994]) would label as Orientalist or even imperialist academic work. I resolve this by not using Irwin’s theoretical model, but only drawing on his content as a scholar of both the *Arabian Nights* and cultural productions associated with the publication of the tales.

<sup>62</sup> Holding ethnic food festivals was a structural component of the Little Falls, NJ parish. A January 1976 article in *The Word* (the official publication of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese) about the consecration of the parish’s new church building, mentioned that the new construction also included a separate banquet hall and kitchen, which was “custom designed” and “will serve the many activities sponsored by the parish, complete with sheesh-kabob charcoal stove.”

<sup>63</sup> I have shown this image to numerous undergraduate classes at two large state universities in Ohio and Michigan. Within a few moments of asking if anybody recognizes the image of the palace on the flyer, multiple students shout out that it is from *Aladdin*.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Cooperson, “The Monstrous Births of ‘Aladdin,’” in *The Arabian Nights Reader*, ed. Ulrich Marzolph (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 265.

<sup>65</sup> Cooperson, “Monstrous Birth.” In addition, Disney illustrators relied on illustrations from Victorian-era editions of the *Nights*. Irwin, “A Thousand and One Nights at the Movies,” 229.

<sup>66</sup> In Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 51.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Cooperson, “Monstrous Birth”; Nabeel Abraham, “Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States,” in *The Development of Arab American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 204.

<sup>69</sup> Cooperson, “Monstrous Birth,” 276; Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 52.

<sup>70</sup> My understanding of “play” follows Roger Abrahams’s folkloric use of the term. “Play,” in *Folklore Studies in the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the Centenary Conference of the Folklore Society*, ed. Venetia J. Newall (Totowa, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1980), 119–22; “An American Vocabulary of Celebrations,” in *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, ed. Alessandro Falassi (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 173–83. “Play” in the “festive” context, as “stylized behavior.” Abrahams, “Play,” 120.

<sup>71</sup> See the following for an elaboration of this concept: Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken, 2000);

John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Matthew Stiffler, "Authentic Arabs, Authentic Christians: Antiochian Orthodox and the Mobilization of Cultural Identity" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010).

<sup>72</sup> Theresa Johnson, John E. Khalil, and Philip Nemy, "A Thousand and One Delights: Arabian Nights Entertainments," souvenir book (Pittsburgh, PA: St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, 1983). I am indebted to Very Rev. Fr. John Abdullah for mailing me a copy of this booklet.

<sup>73</sup> The image appears in *The Arabian Nights Entertainments*, selected and edited by Andrew Lang (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908).

<sup>74</sup> The earliest known Arabic manuscript of the collection of tales known as the *Arabian Nights* or *Alf laïla wa laila* is of Syrian origin, as were many of the parishioners at St. George.

<sup>75</sup> See Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith* (New York: Routledge, 2008) for one view of the need for churches to employ marketing techniques to set themselves apart. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith also discuss how congregations need to "specialize" in the saturated "religious marketplace." Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 136.

<sup>76</sup> I take the idea of cultural citizenship from Aihwa Ong (1996). Ong views cultural citizenship as a process, where "cultural practices and beliefs produced out of negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging within a national population and territory." It's a dialectical process of "self-making and being made." Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the U.S." *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996), 738.

<sup>77</sup> Eid, *Being Arab*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>79</sup> Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 9–10. Although I draw on Susan Nance's important intervention and investigation of the practice of "playing Eastern," her approach is more capitalist deterministic. She writes of performers that made a living trading in stereotypes: "The most profitable and ubiquitous performances, therefore, were those that did not openly challenge cultural difference or consumerism, but functioned as idealized suggestions of how the Muslim world could be useful in the process of consumer individuation." Nance, *How the Arabian Nights*, 18. I agree that Arab American Christians needed to play to stereotypes to successfully market their Arabness, but theirs was not simply a capitalistic venture.

<sup>80</sup> The Antiochians' use of self-Orientalism as a representational practice is part of a larger tradition of the reclamation of Orientalist art by non-

Westerners. For example, Makdisi and Nussbaum (2008) write that after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent killing of Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay, "their palace was laid open to public view." Adorning the walls of the palace were large murals of "exoticized images" from the *Nights* that had a "[close] affinity to Walt Disney's cinematic animations of the tales." Makdisi and Nussbaum's analysis of this event is quite clear and speaks directly to my argument about self-Orientalism. They write of the murals: "Determining what is native and what is imported, what is authentic and what is invented. . . is nearly impossible." Makdisi and Nussbaum, *The Arabian Nights*, 17. Much like Antiochian self-Orientalism is a representational practice that inserts their *reality* as Arab Americans into an exoticized European Orient, Roger Benjamin, writing about the collecting of Orientalist paintings by privileged Arab collectors, says that these individuals "exerted control over the image of their past and of their heritage — an act of repossession." Benjamin, "Post-Colonial Taste? Non-Western Markets for Orientalist Art," In *Orientalism: Delacroix to Klee*, ed. Roger Benjamin (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997), 33. Benjamin further argues that Arab collectors of Orientalist paintings, many of which were inspired by or contracted for illustrations of the *Arabian Nights*, were engaging in a "new sense of positive empowerment expressed through the acquisition and thus redefinition of western colonial documents." *Ibid.*, 35. Using Benjamin's empirical analysis of Arab collectors of Orientalist paintings as a comparison to Antiochians in the US is striking, as both groups were drawn to these exotic images of a pre-colonial past as both markers of nostalgia and as a chance to assert their "claim upon the image of their past." *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>81</sup> Nance, *How the Arabian Nights*; Deloria, *Playing Indian*. He argues that to claim authenticity is to claim the position of other.

<sup>82</sup> Makdisi and Nussbaum, *The Arabian Nights*, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Ronald Stockton, "Ethnic Archetypes and the Arab Image," in *The Development of Arab American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 120.

<sup>84</sup> There have been continual debates in Antiochian church publications since the 1970s about the balance between continued loyalty to the people of their Middle Eastern homeland, a biblical and Christian imperative to help the poor and "downtrodden," and critiques of Israel and other US-supported endeavors in the Middle East by choosing to send money to peoples labeled as "aggressors" or "terrorists."

<sup>85</sup> I take the idea of examining the usefulness of these self-representations from Susan Nance's call to investigate the contextualized use of cultural performances or productions, instead of uncritically labeling all iterations of the Middle East as Orientalist, thus implying their service in America's "imperiousness." Nance, *How the Arabian Nights*, 6.

<sup>86</sup> This comes from Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, where she argues throughout that “contradictions of multiculturalism,” in that multiculturalism is concerned with “importation” and not “immigration.”

<sup>87</sup> Najib Saliba, *Emigration from Syria and the Syrian-Lebanese Community of Worcester, MA* (Ligonier, PA: Antakya Press, 1992). The Worcester church was established in 1902, though Orthodox Syrian immigrants had been meeting for religious meetings earlier. *Ibid.*, 40. Saliba reports that through the fund-raising efforts of the Ladies Society, mostly through their food preparation and sale, the church’s mortgage was paid off in a little over 15 years, *Ibid.*, 48. Church historian Najib Saliba argues that the Worcester, MA, church was “the standard bearer of the Church in Antioch and its birth place” in the US. *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>88</sup> “St. George Mardi-Gras.” 1933. Brochure. Heritage and Learning Center Archives, Antiochian Village, Bolivar, PA.

<sup>89</sup> McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 22.

<sup>90</sup> Makdisi and Nussbaum, among others, claim that “Aladdin” and “Ali Baba” are “orphan stories” of the *Arabian Nights* and are either loose translations or complete European creations. *The Arabian Nights*, 14. This might help explain their popularity in the West.