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OLD AGE IN ARAB AMERICAN LITERATURE: A READING OF FRANCES KHIRALLAH NOBLE'S AND JOSEPH GEHA'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

This essay[1] aims at examining the representation of old age in short stories by the Arab American writers Frances Khirallah Noble and Joseph Geha. For such, it takes into account the Arab migration to the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, it discusses the dualism between disseminating and reinforcing traditional practices from the place of origin and, on the other hand, a tendency toward assimilation as the way to a successful settlement in the new country. As portrayed by the literary texts under analysis here, the tension between perpetuating traditions and embracing foreign traits directly affects elder members of Arab American collectivities, who may be either pushed to the margin by younger generations or respected for holding a set of values and memories which can be used for the benefit of their communities.

Keywords: old age; Arab American short stories; Frances Khirallah Noble; Joseph Geha.

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According to the *World Health Organization* (2024), the population aged sixty years or older is increasing at a fast pace. While in 2019 there were approximately 1 billion persons over the age of sixty, this number is expected to nearly double by 2025. Healthy life expectancy, though, does not increase in the same rate as life expectancy; mortality rates may decrease, but access to medical treatment and proper housing, as well as other factors, do not increase in the same proportion. This, of course, is not to mention that also according to the World Health Organization about one-fourth of older persons are socially isolated, which unquestionably affects the quality of life of this part of the population.

An important question to ask is: what are societies doing to cope with the fast aging of their population? It seems societies are not prepared to deal with population aging, neither are individuals preparing themselves for old age. Another challenging question we wish to pose is: how do we deal with elders in societies that, like most Western societies, value youth, physical strength, competitiveness and economic productivity? We are interested in this general question, just as we are interested in how to deal with this issue in communities of immigrants and their descendants. Particularly, we wish to investigate how aging and older persons are represented in literary works by hyphenated writers, such as Arab Americans.

The twentieth century was undoubtedly a period of intense flow of immigrants to the United States. Some groups of immigrants stand out due to demographic statistics and also due to their literary production: Latinos, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans. We use these categories as umbrella terms for strategic purposes only, and we certainly do not wish to suggest that they are homogeneous. Naturally, among each group, there are significant differences in terms of religion, language, cultural practices etc. In the twentieth century, writers from these groups began to gather in literary circles and create their own publishing houses. In the late sixties and early seventies, Multiculturalism – later on strongly and rightly critiqued in ethnic and race studies – helped give visibility to hyphenated writers as it, among other factors, encouraged the revision of syllabi in schools and universities and pedagogically opened space for non-canonical voices. Several aspects directly related to immigrant groups and their literary production have been under investigation: bilingualism, religion, mobility, and gender, among others; aging, though, has received little, if any, attention. An increasing interest in the theme of growing older, possibly triggered by the aging of the world population, is attested by the number of recent publications on the topic: *Aged by Culture* (Gullette 2004); *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (Brennan 2005); *Aging Matters: An Introduction to Social Gerontology* (Hooyman et al. 2015); *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology* (Twigg and Martin 2015), *Age Studies: A Sociological Examination of How We Age and Are Aged Through the Life Course* (Pickard 2016); *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings* (McGlynn et al. 2017); and *Literature and Ageing* (Barry and Skagen 2020).

Scholars have pointed out that, as societies are growing older rather fast, the theme of old age is now attracting more and more attention (Hooyman et al.

2015, Barry & Skagen 2020, McGynn et al. 2017) and more gerontology university courses are being created (Hooyman et al. xv). But what does it mean to be old? How old is 'old'? The World Health Organization thus classifies age groups: elderly age is 60-75, senile age 75-90, and long livers from 90 years on (Dyussenbayev 2017, 258). Aging, however, is not just chronological. As argued by the editors of *Aging Matters: An Introduction to Social Gerontology*, aging has biological, psychological, and social aspects, and these do not necessarily coincide with the chronological development (Hooyman et al. 6). Despite advanced chronology, a biological body may be relatively 'young' when compared to another body of the same age. By the same token, social and cognitive abilities may or may not age in the same pace as biological traits.

From an interdisciplinary perspective, these works generally address issues such as aging as a process, the cultural construction of old age, longevity, and agism – a term coined by Robert N. Butler in 1968 to refer to age discrimination against elders. Old age, however, is more often than not approached as a homogeneous experience. The still relatively scarce body of studies on aging generally presupposes a homogeneous and white old age. Some researchers in the field indeed acknowledge that social gerontology tends to focus on white, middle-class, older persons. This is a cue to the discussion we wish to propose here, and the question that informs this essay is: how is old age perceived in diasporic groups? Particularly, we wish to look into the literary representation of old age in the Arab American community.

Growing older is a challenge to all, and a double challenge to Arab Americans, a non-mainstream, stereotyped and demonized collectivity because of terrorist attacks and geopolitical conflicts. Notwithstanding the heterogeneity involved in the use of the umbrella term Arab American and keeping in mind the relation between aging and power, some of the further questions that guide this investigation are: how is old age portrayed in Arab American literature? Are elders represented in a positive or derogative way? How does literature explore the intersection between biculturalism and agism? Does it suggest mechanisms to cope with agism? In fiction, particularly, what narrative techniques are used to portray elders and aging?

In the initial decades of Arab migration to the United States, one clearly observes a dualism between disseminating and reinforcing traditional practices from the place of origin and, on the other hand, a tendency toward assimilation as the way to a successful settlement in the new country. The tension between perpetuating traditions and embracing foreign traits directly affects family dynamics. In the early days of Arab presence in the United States, immigrants organized themselves socially around the notion of extended family. While men worked often as peddlers and in commerce, the family routine was managed by wives and elder members of the community. In this sense, one can identify social roles according to gender in that community; one can also point out the existence of an age hierarchy, one which confers importance to older persons both in the private as well as in the public spheres. Steven Salaita (2014) and Lisa Suhair

Majaj (2006), among others, offer a comprehensive and critical mapping of Arab American literature, its main genres, themes and issues. Although one finds published research on Arab Americans and old age in the field of sociology – for instance, Kristine Ajrouch's (2005; 2008) recent publications and Hani Fakhouri's article (2001) –, in literary studies, the topic of aging has not been the focus of investigation or the main concern in creative writing, with few exceptions.

The collection entitled *The Situe Stories* illustrates well the social geography of Arab migration to the United States above mentioned. This compilation of eleven short stories published in the year 2000 by Frances Khirallah Noble explores the relationship among different generations. The stories highlight the role of old women, as indicated in the title of the collection and in the introductory note to the reader: "*Situe* is the Arabic word for grandmother. Although all eleven stories were inspired by my own and other *situes*, only the first and last stories overlap – pillars for the century of experience described in between" (Noble 2000, xi).

Noble's work presents, as a field of intersection among the short narratives, women characters who deal with the circumstances brought about by old age. Whether protagonists or secondary characters, these women are in transit from the Old World because of migration or post-migration contexts. The first and last narratives in *The Situe Stories* deserve attention, once they share a character and offer significant contrastive evidence of the degree of importance attributed to older women in the Arab and Arab American societies. In "Situe," the opening story, one reads about Hasna's childhood; the girl reappears as Mrs. Elias in the closing story "The Honor of Her Presence." In "Situe" the reader is introduced to a sort of archetypal figure of the grandmother, informed by elements from the Arab tradition from the end of the nineteenth century. The old woman remains nameless in the story and is simply referred to as *Situe* – the choice of uppercase in the word conferring importance to what the character stands for. As the story unfolds, one understands that, besides indicating her role within the scope of the family, the Arab word signals the acknowledgment of the old woman's authority in her community.

In a small village in the Old World, *Situe* and the other grandmothers are portrayed as protagonists in a network of folk wisdom that underscores their empowerment in the collective environment. When *Situe*'s granddaughter Hasna falls ill, she and the other old women of the community – "Six sets of sable eyes in dark, creviced skin darkened further by the vigilant Syrian sun" (Noble 4) – gather and discuss possible ways to cure the small child. They consider applying a poultice, making the girl drink a special tea, or perhaps an incantation; *Situe* tirelessly rubs oil on the girl's head. Although none of the remedies result in immediate effects, the figure of the grandmother and the recommendations made by the old women are considered relevant. They are respected for holding that wisdom and for using it for the benefit of a community member.

Besides caring for her ill granddaughter in the manner of a dervish (Noble 1-2), *Situe* also devotes her days to caring for her recently widowed daughter-in-law. Her task, though, becomes ever more complex as Hasna loses her hair:

"Hasna remained hairless in a society of thick, dark manes. Six months, a year, and more years until she approached womanhood with the sleek head of a statue. *Situe* continued to rub, rub" (5). Under *Situe*'s authority and attentive care, Hasna's hair grows again only when she reaches the age of thirteen, becoming a bright blond, which only emphasizes her singularity among the dark-haired inhabitants of the village. *Situe*'s presence and her vigor are part of Hasna's life until she decides to depart from the village in order to meet her brothers, who had migrated to the United States.

Intertextually connected, the first and last stories frame Noble's collection about grandmothers. However, while the opening story favors the imagetic force and the central role of the grandmother in the family and in the community, the closing story conveys other semantic associations of the term "old age" and highlights the state of marginalization of the grandmother that Hasna Elias occupies in the American society. "The Honor of Her Presence" introduces Hasna Elias, now a widow and mother of four, a migrant who settled with her family in California. Hasna spends her days alone and drinks too much wine to fill the emptiness of the house and pass the slowness of time. Hasna seems to experience, for the second time in her life, the condition of being a stranger. In her first experience of dislocation, Hasna leaves her homeland; in the second dislocation, she is estranged from her family and put into a home for the elderly, despite protesting it: "How long do I have to stay here?" (Noble 176).

In a comparison between the stories, it is noticeable that Hasna did not feel displaced when she moved from the Ottoman Empire to the United States. Decades later, now old, Mrs. Elias lives in a kind of inner exile created by the gaps between her and her children and grandchildren. As mentioned earlier, the first generation of Arab immigrants embraced the concept of extended family and allowed the members of the older generation to have an active role in the domestic routine. "The Honor of her Presence", though, suggests that in the Arab American context, as time passes, older persons are more and more pushed to the margin, and with them, so are the memory and the folk wisdom they possess. It seems adequate to apply the term stranger, as proposed by Julia Kristeva (1991), to Hasna Elias:

> [n]ot belonging to any place, any time, any love. A lost origin, the impossibility to take root, a rummaging memory, the present in abeyance. The space of the Foreigner is a moving train, a plane in flight, the very transition that precludes stopping. As to landmarks, there are none. His time? The time of a resurrection that remembers death and what happened before, but misses the glory of being beyond: merely the feeling of a reprieve, of having gotten away. (Kristeva 7-8).

At first a foreigner settled in the American continent, as she ages, Hasna becomes uprooted and displaced, estranged from family and friends, depleted of memories. Hasna's "transition that precludes stopping", in Kristeva's terms, is evident in the number of times she moves, only to end up symbolically on wheels – a wheelchair.

Hasna's addiction to alcohol is discovered by her family and by her doctor, as she gradually loses her sense of belonging and rootedness. Adrift, she is taken from place to place. After leaving the first nursing home and spending a short period of time in one of her sons' houses, she is again put into another home, this time her final one. Her house is symbolically dismembered as Hasna's personal belongings are shared among her children without her awareness or consent – her photographs, dishes, and other items – and her furniture is donated to the church. Hasna's fate is sealed by a "For sale" sign on her front lawn. Her anchor in the material world, ever lighter, is at last only a suitcase with possessions, which she takes with her to the nursing home. Longing for affection and companionship, the protagonist manifests the wish to meet her deceased husband. Little Hasna, who would ride her horse with sovereignty and challenge women's role in society back in the Old World, considered by all as resurrected and triumphant, among other adjectives (Noble 5), now slips into addiction as a form of escapism and longs for her own end.

The contrast between the first and last stories in Noble's collection suggests the gradual prevalence of Western parameters to the detriment of a network of folk wisdom and family values. The very act of smoking, for instance, serves as an element of comparison of then and now: when traveling to America, little Hasna dreams of her *situe* "there, on the porch, in the chair, holding the pipe. Still and calm. Breathing in. Breathing out. In. Out. In. Out" (Noble 13). On the one hand, *Situe* watches her community from the porch while taking in the smoke with pleasure; on the other, in the American context, strenuously marked by social alienation, old Hasna watches TV while smoking a cigarette alone just to pass the time: "Hasna Elias sat alone in the dark, as close to the television set as the couch allowed, the glow of her cigarette moving in and out as she inhaled, exhaled" (Noble 167). For Hasna Elias, cigarettes accompanied the wine, their anodyne effect filling her afternoons.

Hasna's isolation is made even more acute by the fire which she accidentally causes in her house. That episode is taken as evidence that the character was no longer capable of taking care of herself, making her children agree that she could no longer live alone. Hasna leaves her spacious home and moves into a room in the nursing home, a place where, to the protagonist's critical view, the bedspread should match the couch (Noble 175). When her son Nicholas visits her, Hasna tries to evoke her life in the Old World in order to attest to her singularity and strength:

> "I was practically a princess one, Nicky."
> "I know, Ma."
> "I rode stallions from the mountains to the sea."
> "Okay, Ma."
> "Nicky, listen to me. I was the only girl with blonde hair in my village. After I was sick, it grew back blond. I was the only one."
> "Come on, Ma." (Noble 176)

Her son's reluctance, if not indifference, in view of her remarks, indicates a gap between generations. His attitude and that of his siblings suggest a process of assimilation that resulted in a perception of old age as a ruin, a perspective that generally characterizes Western societies. Hasna's descendants do not seem to advance a kind of dynamics that allows for an effective dialogue between different age groups in the Arab and Arab American contexts. The loss that results from the gap between generations goes against a fruitful dialogue between cultures, in the terms discussed by Homi Bhabha (1994). As he argues, what

> is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives or originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative signs of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

The "articulation of cultural differences" is replaced in Noble's last story by a 'disarticulation' of communication and collaboration. Moreover, the absence of dialogue among generations can be claimed to result from the fact that modernity has largely condemned to forgetfulness those who do not comply with the notion of productivity and progress in contemporary societies. In this sense, the title of the closing story is invested with ambiguity: while it suggests a tribute to Hasna as a *situe* figure, it is ironic insofar as it is invested with criticism since Hasna's presence is not honored by her family or her community; she is pushed to the margin along with those who are not economically productive. Hasna's grandson negligently returns to his day nap at the news that the smoke seen from her house was caused by "only" a couch burning; her children's visits become rare; her grandchildren's kisses are dutiful but little loving: "'Give your grandmother a kiss when you go in.' (They were dutiful children and did as they were told, claimed a handful of caramels from the candy dish on the table and rushed outside to play under the balmy evening sky.)" (Noble 169).

Her sons and daughters-in-law do the same that they had done to Hasna's daughter Elizabeth, who was "banned out of love" (Noble 168): diagnosed as psychologically unstable, Elizabeth is ambiguously banned from the family because they loved her and wanted to provide professional care for her in a mental institution – or banned away from the love that only family could provide because she had become a burden. Elizabeth is placed in a psychiatric clinic just as Hasna is placed in a nursing home. In fact, Hasna's alienation began even before she was sent to live in a home. Her grandchildren's lack of interest in Arab traditions and their estrangement from her ethical and moral values certainly contribute to her isolation – a scenario quite different from the visceral relation between Hasna and her *situe* in the opening story, which confers the girl with strength and determination to embark on a journey to the unknown world of the United States.

When approached from the biological point of view, the aging process indeed entails degeneration and limitation. The fact that these stories portray the same character as a child and then as an old woman serves to remind one of an inherent condition to all human beings: within each child lives the old person to be; youth and old age are part of a continuum. Hasna's grandchildren visit her out of obligation, and her children do as to inspect her condition. Both children and grandchildren view old age as decrepitude and debilitation but do not seem to realize that they will be in a similar condition in the future.

The closing passage of "The Honor of Her Presence" underscores senescence as a process, as it contrasts past and present. In the nursing home, Hasna naps on a wheelchair and dreams that she is on a train headed west, in the company of her husband and children. At the end of the journey, she disembarks and steps with firm feet on the platform – actually, not a dream but a recollection during sleep of what happened in her past. The steady feet wearing shoes are contrasted in the present with her frail feet wearing slippers, on the footrest of the wheelchair. The reader does not know whether Hasna's life expired at the exact moment that her feet, not touching the ground, shifted slightly, but the final image undoubtedly epitomizes Hasna's lack of agency.

It is worth noting, moreover, that Noble's collection includes a story – "The American Way," symbolically occupying a central position in the collection – in which the grandmother figure is undergoing a transition from the ways of the Old World to the ways of the American society. Worthy of respect, the grandmother in that story is still responsible, for instance, for cooking for the family, but change is gradually making its way, introduced mostly by her daughter-in-law: "Mansour's wife called their daughter 'Linda' in defiance of the expectation that the first girl in two generations and the child they never expected would be named after her grandmother, her *situe*, Mansour's mother, who lived and moved in their house like a shadow" (Noble 76).

As the narrator explains, being home alone was not for girls, wives, or widows. After her husband died, the grandmother "divided her furniture among her children and moved, like a bride without a dowry, into Mansour's house" (Noble 79), making Mansour's brother feel "the guilt of a wealthy son whose mother didn't live under his roof" (Noble 81). With his brother's help, Mansour opened an illegal gambling business. His luck changed and so did his wife, who bought a new couch, new ornaments for the house, new dresses to attend church, and an oil painting of her daughter. This, in turn, made the grandmother become more self-confident:

> Whether it was as the mother of two successful sons or as the former owner of furniture of quality was difficult to ascertain. She probably didn't know herself. What is known is that on the day of the delivery of Lena's couch, one of the servicemen saw *Situe*'s old sideboard, her chairs, the field of elegant inlaid wood picture frames: "Now, this is furniture," he raved and called the others to see. (Noble 96).

As a secondary character, the grandmother's change is minor and subtle and is portrayed as only a part of the couple's financial improvement in American society, to recall the story's title. However, her becoming gradually prouder of material possessions signals a deeper process of change in the family relations.

In her aesthetic-ethical project, Frances Khirallah Noble's fiction tackles crucial issues in contemporary societies currently under discussion by gerontologists and sociologists. Another writer who portrays older characters, cultural traditions, and intergenerational relationships in the Arab American context, though in a different light, is Joseph Geha. Again, the reader finds an intertextual relation among the stories that make up the collection *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (1990). "Almost Thirty" is quite fitting to illustrate both the portrayal of elders in the Arab American community and to establish a contrast, particularly with Noble's "The Honor of her Presence."

Haleem, the narrator, recounts a part of his family history against a background of a Lebanese past and migration to the United States. The episodes narrated all gravitate around a central time reference: the death of Haleem's father, which is closely associated with Haleem's 'miraculously' reaching the age of 30. The passing of his father represents a sort of transition from youth into adulthood, both due to the relevance of the father in his life and to the closing of another decade of life.

The story's title "Almost Thirty" is repeated several times along the narrative, and becomes almost a narrative embodiment of Haleem's thoughts and feelings. Haleem's mourning, his withdrawal from family, his problems with alcohol, and his near death by taking too many sleeping pills are all punctuated by the reference to his father. He marries, gets divorced and, after reuniting with his family, marries again. The fact that Haleem and his cousin George married American women and embraced new traditions does not prevent them from following the Lebanese traditions of their ancestors. Haleem makes a point of saying, "Like me, George was the son of old parents" (Geha 1990, 35), and it becomes clear as the story progresses that the older relatives – parents, uncles, aunts – are essential to younger generation members' and therefore respected and admired.

At the onset of the story, Haleem describes his father as a white-haired man who "would grumble and devote long Arabic curses to the snow of this country" (Geha 32). During Haleem's childhood walks with his father, upon seeing the spring flowers bending under the weight of snow, the father would tell him to hold his peace. Several years later, after Haleem's near-or death, his uncle Yousef went to Pennsylvania to bring him back to Ohio. The uncle also cursed the late snow just like Haleem's father used to: "We passed Walbridge Park on the way. The snow was still falling, and the yellow crocuses and daffodils in the park were bowed nearly double under the weight of it. 'Look at that,' Uncle Yousef said, nodding his head toward the flowers and the snow. 'Goddamn it'" (Geha 46).

Finally, in the closing of the story, it is Haleem himself who watches the late snowfall and steps into his late father's shoes: "I found myself able to curse the late and unexpected snow, to curse it a short curse and then hold my peace" (Geha

47). The story thus portrays a cycle in which the younger generation identifies with and repeats the words and attitudes of the older one, as the result of intimacy and respect. Even more insightful in Geha's "Almost Thirty", is the fact that nature ambiguously represents both that which is perennial and that which is ephemeral: the constancy and certainty that seasons will change, just as snow will pass and flowers are short-lived. Change thus exists inside permanence and repetition. By the same token, the younger generation will maintain community and family values, but may assimilate new cultural traits. Haleem and George married American women, but still attended the family picnic and danced the *debkee*; they ate egg salad sandwiches, but in the dance the youth locked arms with elders.

The cousins' spontaneous attitude of reverence towards members of the older generation is akin to the Confucian notion of filial piety, an internalized behavior according to which one's ancestors and elders, in general, must be treated with respect and honor. An ethical conduct, the idea of filial piety promotes love and is based on the reciprocity of what children received from parents and grandparents. Another story from Geha's collection *Through and Through* that portrays the same network of support and homage to older relatives is "Monkey Business". Recently widowed Nazir relies on his Aunt Afifie – the same Aunt Afifie that attended the family picnics with Haleem and George in "Almost Thirty" – to find him a new bride that would help raise his young son. At his wife's funeral, Nazir "had to be supported on either side by an uncle" (Geha 5); later he "removed the black arm band from his jacket, and that very night he spoke with Braheem Yakoub about finding another mama for the boy. Eventually, Braheem consulted Aunt Afifie; such things were, after all, really her business" (Geha 5-6). It is also the aunt who takes the ring back from the bride once they realize she behaves inadequately and is not a proper choice. Though a secondary character in both stories, Afifie's position as counselor reveals an age hierarchy that emphasizes reverence and respect for the community elders, a legacy of Arab societies passed on to Arab Americans. Also significant is the fact that in the closing passage the short story projects the attitude of caring for the older generation onto the future. Nazir's son, only a child, takes on his deceased mother's role and already takes care of his father. When the father walks in soaked from the rain, the boy hands him a towel and says: "I put on some coffee" (Geha 18).

Geha's "Almost Thirty" and "Monkey Business" portray a strong bond not only between father and son, but also between nephews and uncles or aunts, thus illustrating the perpetuation of tradition in a bicultural context. Moreover, both stories illustrate the presence of a concept widely used in gerontology: resilience, that is, the older person's capacity to deal with illnesses and/or other stress-generating factors. According to the Center for Policy on Ageing (2014), in Norfolk, England, resilience "is the ability to stand up to adversity and to 'bounce back' or return to a state of equilibrium following adverse episodes." The Center also points out the association between greater resilience and health, spirituality and communal interaction. In Geha's stories, as well as in Francis Noble's "Situe," resilience is portrayed as a communal force, instead of

an individual asset. The family gatherings, as well as the congregation of *situes* to cure the granddaughter portrayed in the works can be considered then the basis of such resilience. The young cousins George and Haleem find in each other and in the older members of their community the support that is needed to overcome their insecurities and psychological suffering; the members of the older generation, in turn, are ready to support the younger generations because they themselves are emotionally and psychologically strong. Honoring elders and resilience do not have to be strived for, but rather are learned from older members of the community and will be, in favorable circumstances, passed on to the younger generations, along with other traditions.

As claimed by Margaret Gullette in *Aged by Culture* (2014), aging is demeaned by culture and the media construct old age as a narrative of decline and decadence through the dissemination of negative images of elders against positive images of youth. In the fictional representation of the Arab diaspora in the United States, one can find less oppressive alternatives to this scenario. While, on the one hand, Francis Noble's "The Honor of Her Presence" constructs old age as an undesirable burden, on the other hand, there are works that offer a different scenario, one that allows a degree of agency to older generations. It is worth mentioning, furthermore, that although Noble's *The Situe Stories* invites readers to establish a comparison between the stories that bookend the collection, the tone is not one of condemnation. What the collection does accomplish, rather, is a broader question: given the fact that senescence is a concept informed by historical developments, how can Arabs and their descendants negotiate their cultural legacy in a contemporary social environment that is pragmatic and utilitarian?

A discussion of the fictional representation of elders in Arab American literature is in tune with Lisa Suhair Majaj's postulations in "New Directions: Arab American Writing Today" (2006). In that essay, Majaj maps the ground that has been covered and lists new territories yet to be explored by Arab American writers. According to the Palestinian American critic,

> We confront, as much as any other community, internal problems linked both to our Arab and our American identities and contexts. Arab Americans are not free of domestic violence, drug use, gang participation, and so-called "honor killings." All too often racism, sexism, classism and especially homophobia go unquestioned. While literary texts are not social exposés, they nonetheless provide a forum within which social questions may be probed: this role should not be forgotten or ignored. (Majaj 2006, 132)

Alongside gender inequality and racialization, among other issues pointed out by Majaj, we believe that aging and agism also deserve scrutiny. Aging is under investigation in contemporary societies at large; in the case of a hybrid community such as the Arab American, it is a particularly key aspect to study. Aging is an intrinsic element of what Majaj aptly termed 'ethnogenesis' (132); it

is one end of the continuum of senescence that allows for the birth of something new. As Majaj argues,

> At the beginning of the 21st century, the split vision we have possessed since our arrival in the Americas may be our most important legacy, forcing us to direct our gaze not only backwards to the past, but forward to a future we are engaged in writing ourselves – and to do so with our feet planted firmly on the Arab American ground beneath our feet. (135)

Old age is part of the past toward which Arab Americans must gaze in order to move firmly into the future. Such an anchor is necessary so as not to float adrift. Aging is also a common denominator between East and West, and its study in the bicultural context may perhaps even shed some light on growing older in non-hyphenated social groups.

Far from suggesting a nostalgic return to the past, the study of old age in Arab American literature will bring to the fore complex mechanisms of memory and its centrality in a community. It is not about turning grandmothers into *situes*, but rather acknowledging their importance and wisdom, whether clothed in joy or in sadness. Creating a gravitational field around elders allows communication between the center of tradition and younger generations in the process of constructing new meanings, or "new signs of identity," in Homi Bhabha's terms discussed above. This, in turn, allows for the development of a critical view of hybridity in diaspora and Arab American subjectivities.

Empowerment and disempowerment of older persons are directly affected by the prevalence or not of Western parameters of productivity and autonomy to the detriment of valuing traditional practices. A critical view of this aspect allows Arab Americans to negotiate their inevitable bicultural condition in a more positive way and understand the urgency of discussing the hybrid position of older persons, thus making possible for the latter to retain or achieve agency in their community. Although some works of literature by Arab Americans may portray older members of the community as senile, other representations show elders with discernment and capacity, demonstrating that aging and agency are not incompatible. The literary works under discussion here as well as others reinforce how positive the communal acceptance of aging can be for all.

The present essay dedicates more attention to Noble's stories for the reason that in "The Honor of Her Presence" the older person is the protagonist, and "Situe" serves as a counterpoint to the presentation of old age in the former. The other stories discussed here, namely "Almost Thirty" and "Monkey Business," are not developed to the same extent as Noble's because in them the older characters are minor ones. However, one could state that Noble's works serve as a kind of framework to discuss the representation of elders in other works by Arab Americans, whether protagonists or not. The contrast offered by Noble's stories shed light, for instance, on the character Mukhlis and an episode about his childhood during war times back in Lebanon, which he tells his great nephew, in Gregory Orfalea's story "The Chandelier" (1984) and also Sirine's uncle, the

storyteller, in Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent* (2003). This signals the need for more literary representations of elders, especially elders in the role of protagonists, which is the role they ought to have in the process of passing traditions down from generation to generation. Considering that societies, in general, are aging and aging quite fast, it is urgent to promote more sociological discussions of elders as well as more literary representations of this age group in Arab American literature.

The world of today's generation is different from that of older persons, that is undeniable. But to establish a dialogue between different age groups can allow cultural traditions to be reinscribed in the present so as to envision a solid future. At a time of political conflicts and turmoil in the Middle East such as the world is witnessing today, the promise of a future is seriously under threat and so is the perpetuation of a foundational past. The devastation of towns, the destruction of historical sites, and the decimation of a significant portion of a generation of people, in summary, the catastrophic present can be counterpointed in part by the strengthening of ties with the past and its emissaries. The fictional portrayal of these representatives of the past may help to envision another reality in the time yet to come.

Note

1. Part of this essay has been published in Portuguese in GONÇALVES, Gláucia Renate; MALLOY, Letícia (ed.). *Figurações da infância e da velhice na literatura*. Coleção Polifonia. Belo Horizonte: Tradição Planalto, 2022

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