

Resisting Arab American Label in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Origin*: From Descent to Consent, from Origin to Originality

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Abstract

The paper discusses Diana Abu-Jaber's understanding of ethnicity and ethnic literature as portrayed in her novel Origin. In contrast with her previous works – which revolve around Arab American characters, motifs, and themes – Origin is an Arab American novel which does not mention the word Arab. Still, the setting of the story, confined to multicultural Syracuse, offers a space for negotiating Arab American topics such as the search for one's roots and identity and the role of memory. By refraining from using the word Arab, Abu-Jaber questions the "Arab American label" tacitly ascribed to American authors of Arab origin, and she challenges the discourse of ethnicity and ethnic literatures.

Keywords: Arab American literature, Diana Abu-Jaber, Origin, ethnic writing, detective story, identity, other

Introduction

The image of American literature as "a branch of English stock" (Lauter xvii) has drastically changed during the last fifty years. The Civil Rights Movement, along with other social movements of the 1960s, began to change the understanding of the American literary canon. Writers who had previously been ignored – whether by virtue of ethnicity, race,

or gender – gradually found their way to US publishing houses, college courses, literary discussions, and, most significantly, to the awareness of the American reader. American bookstores began to put new labels on their shelves, labels denoting new categories of the American literary tradition: Native American authors, African American poetry, Jewish American letters, Chicano fiction, etc. Sometimes, a general label of US ethnic literatures would be used. This label gradually included more and more groups residing in the US multicultural literary milieu. The Arab American literary label, which this article focuses on, was among the most recent labels to appear, having attracted wider critical interest only in the last two decades. In this context, Wail S. Hassan maintains that “an entire tradition of Arab American literature” (xi) was for a long time largely ignored “in the by-then thriving fields of ethnic American, minority, and postcolonial studies” (xi).

In contrast, the beginning of the 21st century has been witnessing what Fadda-Conrey refers to as “an exciting flourishing of Arab American literature” (1). New authors from an Arab background have found their ways to publishing houses throughout the United States; university courses focusing on Arab American culture and literature have been opened; journals specializing in Arab American writing have been established¹, etc. As Al Maleh states, “[f]ollowing a half-century of dormancy², Arab American literature revived with unprecedented, breath-taking rapidity” (21). Salaita enumerates the reasons for this Arab American *entrée* to the American literary landscape: the events of 9/11, the US political agenda in the Middle East, the questions of immigration and Islam, as well as the status of and controversy over ethnic writing and the prominence of some Arab American writers and literary critics³ (*Arab American* 8–9). In other words, at the onset of the 21st century the (Arab) American reader becomes interested in Islam and Muslims (a term often wrongly ascribed to all Arabs); while the Arab American writer feels compelled to respond to the stereotypes about Arabs existing in American society – views perceiving Islam as a backward religion residing in the past; perceptions of Arab women as puppets in the hands of men; or public opinion nourished by existing mass media which portray all Arabs as terrorists longing to destroy Western civilization.

Though the interest in Arab American writing is quite recent, the roots of Arab American literature date back to the second half of the 19th century when the representatives of what later became known as the *Mahjar*⁴ movement stepped onto the formidable Ellis Island. These authors (including Gibran Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani) always felt more like sojourners than immigrants, constantly “commuting” between their adopted country and their Lebanese homeland. In writing, they were bilinguals whose works in English and in Arabic display two distinctive features. In Arabic, they built on European and American romanticism, bringing to Arabic literature “new ideas and new forms that Arab writers needed” (Imangulieva 21). However, in their English works, they would often resort to self-orientalizing, assuming the role of Eastern prophets on the American continent, as exemplified by Gibran’s masterpiece *The Prophet* (Hassan 2011). The age of *Mahjar* was followed by the age of autobiographies whose authors wanted to be on the American side of the hyphen – authors like George Hamid⁵ or Salom Rizk⁶ who “distanced themselves from those elements of Arab culture viewed as less readily assimilable” (Majaj). As in the case of many other ethnic groups in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement as well as The Black Power Movement of the 1960s created more fertile ground for those Arab

American authors who were less willing to assimilate than their predecessors had been.

In contrast to the representatives of the *Mahjar*, who viewed the Arab world as their true homeland and who eventually returned to the Middle East, contemporary Arab American authors are more apt to see their home in America. With the aim of challenging the discriminatory views of Arabs in America, they often resort to themes displaying peaceful features of Arab immigrants in the United States – themes related to Arab folk culture, the role of family or food. Similarly to the representatives of other US ethnic groups, Arab American authors often discuss such topics as the search for home and identity, the conflict between the personal and the collective/political, hybridity and hyphenated identity accompanied with the mixing of genres⁷ and languages. As Wail S. Hassan puts it, in Arab American writing these thematic concerns are often tackled from the perspective of Said's Orientalism and the concept of cultural translation (4). Despite the ongoing interest in Arab American authors, accompanied by the tireless publishing of their works, "there is not yet an established canon of Arab American novels" (Darraj 179). Nevertheless, most of these novels revolve around some common issues, such as the attempts to reconcile the American and the Arab side of one's identity, discrimination, American politics in the Middle East or the role of Islam. As Fadda Conrey notes, "[i]nstead of framing their work primarily in terms of its contributions to an ongoing tradition of Arabic literature, the literary output of contemporary Arab American writers needs to be read *as* American literature, with a recognition of its formative role in shaping alternative and antihegemonic types of US cultural production" (18). However, it is still read as the literature of the other, and many Arab American authors struggle with what Nouri Gana terms the "Arab American label" (29). This label is given to literary works by American writers of Arab origin even if their books do not discuss Arab American characters or themes – such as Alameddine's 2014 narrative *An Unnecessary Woman* about a Lebanese recluse spending most of her days translating books in her Beirut apartment. Diana Abu-Jaber, whose novel *Origin* is the subject of this article, has also struggled with this label throughout her literary career.

Abu-Jaber – born in 1959 in Syracuse (which is also the setting of her novel *Origin*) to a Jordanian father and an American (Irish-German) mother (Oakes 2) – is a critically acclaimed author of four novels, two food memoirs, and numerous essays and short stories. She holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing. Her debut novel, *Arabian Jazz* (1993), is considered the first work of modern Arab American literature to achieve wide critical acclaim (Salaita, *Modern Arab* 97). Her former teachers include Joyce Carol Oates and John Gardner (Miller 5), but she regards her parents' "Arab American narrative" as the most significant influence on her literary pursuits. As she asserts in the "Foreword" to *The Language of Baklava*, "My childhood was made up of stories – the memories and recollections of my father's history and the storybook myths and legends that my mother brought me to read" (xi). In an article entitled "A Life of Stories", Abu-Jaber further contemplates her Arab-American (Father-Mother) upbringing by employing the language of fairy-tales: "I lived between America and Jordan, like the mermaid who was neither fully human nor fish—I knew myself to be a creature of the in-between" (122). The protagonists of Abu-Jaber's works are also "creatures in-between" – first or second generation immigrants from the Middle East who need to tackle the problem of the Arab American label. Even Abu-Jaber was once warned against the ethnic label by her professor, who told her: "If you publish

under Abu-Jaber, people are always going to think of you as the ethnic writer. You should absolutely change it to an American name and just go for it” (qtd. in Al Maleh 36). Abu-Jaber did not change her name; nevertheless, she managed to challenge the label that her professor had warned her against by completely ignoring it in her 2007 detective thriller *Origin*. Nevertheless, it is not just the Arab American tag that she casts doubt on in her novel; Abu-Jaber also questions the general concept of ethnicity and ethnic literature by taking a specific stance toward belonging, which for her is a matter of personal choice, the result of one’s own longing to belong. Thus, the quest of her protagonist, who is looking for her roots and origins, turns out to be a failure at the end of the novel. For Abu-Jaber, blood is not thicker than water, and one’s belonging is a matter of invention and cultural construction. In Werner Sollors’ terms – in a descent-versus-consent conflict (*Beyond Ethnicity* 6) – Abu-Jaber’s 2007 novel, despite its title, seems to be favoring the consent; it is less about origin than about originality.

Ethnicity as a Descent versus Consent Conflict

Multiple authors have pointed out the problem of defining ethnicity, considering it a concept that is difficult to define mainly because of “its interrelations with race, nation, culture, geography, by migration, immigration, discrimination, dominance and control, and by historical and cultural values of the times” (Tian 192). The *Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnic Studies* defines ethnicity as “a group possessing some degree of coherence and solidarity composed of people who are, at least latently, aware of having common origins and interests” (142). While the first definition points to both biological and cultural aspects of ethnic identity, the second stresses the idea of awareness of common origins (descent) and interests. In other words, it relates to the subjective nature of ethnicity, suggesting that one’s ethnic belonging is a matter of individual identification with a certain group – or, as Lauret puts it, that “ethnicity is less a matter of identity than of *identification* with others who are perceived to share the same plight” (3).

The crucial problem linked to the concept of ethnicity relates to the question as to which groups should be referred to as ethnic groups. The inclusive use of the word suggests an “ethnicity-for-all principle” ascribing ethnicity to dominant as well as minority groups. In this sense the US ethnic map includes Yankees, WASPs, African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, etc. Nevertheless, as Werner Sollors puts it, a common use of the word follows the principle of “ethnicity minus one” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 25) by excluding the dominant group from the category. In this sense, ethnicity is perceived as otherness, and in this concept the ethnic map of the United States excludes the dominant group. For this reason, instead of ethnicity Sollors prefers to rely on “the cultural construction of the codes of consent and descent” (*Beyond Ethnicity* 39). As the author stresses at a different point in his work, the former focuses on “our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our fates’” (6) while the latter sees us as heirs, looking at our “hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements” (6). In another work, Sollors associates ethnicity with invention, equating it with “collective fictions” (*The Invention of Ethnicity* xi) which are continually created and recreated. In this sense, ethnicity is not viewed as something stable, as a final product of culture or society, but as a process which is subject to constant

change and which is subjective in its essence. This understanding goes hand in hand with the historical experience of Arab American writers from different generations (outlined in the Introduction), because their ideas of ethnic belonging differ not only between specific generations but also between individual authors.

The concept of ethnicity or an ethnic group complicates the concept of ethnic literature and ethnic authors. Since the emergence of ethnic literatures in the USA, these authors have been trying to share their experience in writing, and they have managed to give American literature a specific ethnic *timbre*. Thus their literary works have been classified as ethnic literature – a concept further complicated by other terms frequently applied in literary studies, such as minority writing or immigrant narratives. While minority refers to a number, immigration suggests movement. Židová assumes that both ethnic and immigrant writing “present characteristic features of the minor ethnic group, but immigrant literature, additionally, deals with the immigrant experiences and problems with adaptation to the new culture” (73). Immigrant narratives stress the geographical aspect; very often they revolve around the movement and translation (translation both as a physical and as a linguistic transfer) of an individual or a group to a different (geographical or cultural) setting. Minority literature focuses on the quantitative aspect, and refers to a smaller (or subordinate) group in a society in comparison with a dominant group. Thus, the term ethnic literature could be considered “superior to and more inclusive than” the other two terms (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 39). In other words, the concept of ethnic literature is superior to the more specific concepts of immigrant and minority literatures. While immigrant literature focuses on the immigrant experience stemming from the process of movement (the process of changing places), minority writing calls attention to the criterion of the size of a specific group.

Considering the universalist, inclusive use of the term, one may ask a question as to which literature is not ethnic. Salaita assumes that ethnic narratives include ethnic characters. The problem is that all human beings have an ethnicity; therefore, all literature has some ethnic background. As Salaita suggests, the term ethnic is mostly used to mean “the characters who are recognized to belong to an ethnic minority community, which is usually what the term [ethnic literature] connotes” (*Modern Arab* 107). Similarly, for Reilly ethnic literature is “literature like any other, except that it contains ethnic references” (2). It does not depend on the author’s race, origin or association, but is a matter of personal preference. The writer makes a choice as to whether particular ethnic references are going to be included in his or her work or to what extent they are going to be included. Ostendorf looks at the problem from the author’s perspective, and classifies ethnic references on the basis of the authorial subject that includes them in a work of literature. This approach allows him to distinguish three forms of both immigrant and ethnic literature: literary works “about immigrants and ethnics written from the point of view [...] of the dominant culture”; works “for immigrant and ethnic groups written from the point of view of the old culture” (these might be produced either in the adopted country or the country of origin); and last but not least, literary works “evolving out of the ethnic group experience in America written for the group in question and for the larger market” (583). In other words, ethnic (or immigrant) literature is not solely written by immigrants or by what we tend to refer to as minorities (the ethnicity-minus-one principle) but also by the members of

the dominant culture (the ethnicity-for-all principle). Moreover, ethnic literature includes works “from abroad” (or from the immigrants’ native country). This supports the idea of universalist writing: “If searching for it [ethnic literature] becomes difficult, try looking under the heading of ‘Universal Reading.’ It should encompass everything from John Steinbeck to Amy Tan, all of it specific to certain experiences and able to be appreciated by all readers” (Tamkin).

If we take ethnic literature as any kind of literature which can (but does not necessarily have to) be written by a minority writer but which contains ethnic references, then what label should we ascribe to a literary work which is written by an author from a minority ethnic group in the USA, a second generation immigrant, but whose work refrains from using references to a specific ethnic group? Abu-Jaber’s *Origin* seems to fall into this category. Despite its book cover with an Arab name and an English title, which might mislead the reader into believing that the book is going to tackle the life of Arab immigrants in America, the novel never mentions the word Arab. Abu-Jaber includes a wide range of characters from various ethnic backgrounds, but their descent relations are either suggested implicitly or are ignored. In the case of the novel’s protagonist, they are unknown. Nevertheless, by employing this special approach, Abu-Jaber seems to make a point about ethnicity and ethnic writing in general by challenging the reader’s views of origin, race, and belonging.

Abu-Jaber’s Origin versus Originality Dilemma

Lena Dawson, the protagonist of *Origin*, is very different from the protagonists of Abu-Jaber’s previous literary pursuits. The *Arabian Jazz* (1993) as well as *Crescent* (2003) contain Arab American characters living in the United States who struggle with the gap between American and Arab culture, which is translated to them by their family relatives or friends. In contrast, Lena Dawson, an FBI fingerprint specialist, has no idea as to where she comes from. As a child, she was taken (but not officially adopted) by an American couple, but no one ever gave her any information regarding her real parents. Blurred and confusing memories of her childhood prompt her to create a story of her origin: Lena is convinced that she survived a plane crash in the jungle; was saved and raised by apes; then discovered by people and brought to a Syracuse orphanage. This story outlives Lena’s childhood. As an adult she does not try to search for the truth; the ape tale seems to satisfy her until a series of strange crib deaths occur. Initially, they are diagnosed as unusual occurrences of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome). Nevertheless, Lena gradually comes to the conclusion that in Syracuse there is a serial killer responsible for the babies’ deaths and that these deaths are somehow linked to her own life story. The search for the killer eventually turns out to be Lena’s search for her own origin.

The detectives’ investigation includes several inaccuracies and implausibilities, as Lena’s detective colleagues seem to overlook some details that an ordinary detective would look at as the first thing. For instance, Lena is the only one who manages, upon visiting the baby’s room, to discover that there is something poisonous about the crib. Soon, her suspicion is confirmed – Lena was able to identify lead and other poisonous substances in the house just by her sensory experience. In reality, the presence of lead would have been

checked as one of the first steps in an investigation of a baby's death. As Hall suggests, "the police-detective elements do not interest Abu-Jaber enough to induce her to take them seriously. What interests her is a personal detective story that we all share: the desire to understand where we come from" (Hall). In other words, *Origin* can be read as a dual-layer detective story. In the first layer, Lena is a detective searching for the identity of the killer, while in the second layer, she is a human being searching for her own identity. In contrast with her other literary works, "the search for identity [in *Origin*] is not riveted on different ethnic backgrounds but delves more deeply into questions of nature vs. nurture, and even animal vs. human" (Shalal-Esa). Moreover, the way in which Abu-Jaber tackles the question of origin and ethnicity questions the way the expressions ethnicity and ethnic literature are used. Her critique of the notion of ethnicity is demonstrated through her treatment of the characters residing in winter-beaten Syracuse as well as through the thematic concerns of the novel.

The narrative hosts a wide variety of characters whose background is suggested implicitly, between the lines. Lena's neighbor is called Mr Memdouah – an elderly fellow, a former professor of sociology – whose name suggests Arab origin. He is portrayed as a confused man who often talks to himself and whose ideas are impossible to follow. In the novel, he serves as a scapegoat, who is unjustly accused of being the killer, but Lena succeeds in proving his innocence. To compare, Margo, one of Lena's colleagues at work, has two small children, Amahl and Fareed. Throughout the novel, the reader does not learn anything about their background directly; their Arab origin is hinted at implicitly, through their names. At one point of the novel, Margo tells Lena: "I always thought you were so lucky – not knowing what you came from. Not having to deal with it. You can just walk around [...] sort of invisible" (340). Margo, in other words, assumes that being considered "other" because of one's origin is a far less favorable situation than knowing nothing about one's background.

Abu-Jaber did not include only characters with Arabic names in the story. Lena's colleague and partner Keller Duseky has a family tree stretching across several countries and cultures. His background is discussed in a conversation with Myrtle, who took care of Lena before she was sent to her foster parents:

Keller clears his throat.
 She turns her head, looking at him from a bit of an angle.
 "Duseky," she says slowly, testing his name.
 "A Czech boy, are you?"
 "My great-great-grandparents," he says, drawing himself up. "And Swiss, French, Irish. . ."
 "Good, good. I'm good at nationalities." (255)

This mixed background complicates the notion of a uniform ethnic label and suggests Edward Said's idea that "[n]o one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no-more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (407). Similarly to all other characters in the novel, Keller is haunted by his memories and fears. His ethnic background does

not protect him from the problems that every man has to face at some point of his life (in Keller's case, it is the loss of his father and divorce).

Another character of mixed origin in the novel is Troy Hawerstraw, whose murder Lena investigates. Troy's mother has several children with different fathers. In the case of Troy, she does not even know the father's name, as he was a migrant worker who once came to her house asking for water and stayed a little longer. The man's ethnicity is hinted at implicitly: "She named him [her son] Troy, she said, because she didn't know Spanish – she didn't even know the man's name, but she wanted to name this wheat-skinned boy something exotic and that's what Troy sounded like to her" (62). The reader might infer that Troy's father was a Spanish-speaking immigrant, which is also supported by the remark pointing to his wheat skin. Towards the end of the novel, the boy is referred to as a "[p]oor creature. One of the damaged" (357). This remark is made by the murderer who kills babies whose life was not planned, and who therefore had no right to survive.

The question of ethnicity is especially complicated in the case of Lena. Not even her racial background is certain. As a child, she accidentally hears her foster mother proclaim: "...guaranteed she [Lena] was a hundred percent white. I'm not even sure..." (32). Lena is aware of her exotic appearance, of her oddity or otherness. In terms of her appearance, she is neither white nor African American; she seems to be something in-between:

My racial identity blurs at the edges: I have Caucasoid smooth wavy hair the color of black coffee. I cut it myself, between clavicle and jaw—Charlie⁸ likes it long. My skin seems too deeply pigmented to match my eye color: I look suntanned—almost amber, but sallow in elevators and lobbies. My eyes are that compromise of the indefinite—green—brown—flecked, gold-ringed. My face is long, the bones in my jaw and cheeks pronounced, my nose low and narrow, my mouth wide—the skin of my lips naturally a bitten or burn vermilion... (45)

Margo thinks that Lena is a mix "like she might have a black mommy, but she might be Puerto Rican, or maybe just a year-round suntan in Syracuse" (143). Her foster parents never disclose anything about her background and let her believe in her ape story. Lena's blurred memories of green jungle and apes convince her that the ape tale is real. When the crib deaths occur and Lena realizes that they are somehow linked to her (the killer carries an ape's tooth which is almost identical with the tooth that Lena wore when she came to her foster parents), she begins to search for her roots. At this point of the novel, the two layers of the detective story – one revolving around the investigation of the crime and the other related to Lena's "investigation" of her origins – come together. Lena realizes that without solving the former she will not be able to solve the latter.

The results of her two investigations are ambiguous. While she manages to identify the killer, she does not really identify who her true parents were. Having gone through a heap of folders containing information about orphaned or abandoned babies who were admitted to Lyons Hospital approximately at the same time as Lena, she identifies the footprints which are in fact hers: "I look for discrepancies in the ridge paths between the questioned and the known—something to indicate the prints don't match. But each comparison leads to one conclusion: it's me" (374). Her finding, however, does not reveal her origin: "2/12/70.

Newborn infant, abandoned. Bruises on arms and legs. Contusion and frostbite of extremities. Mild hypothermia. Breathing partially obstructed by debris. Estimated 8–48 hours post-partum. Infant discovered covered with trash in dumpster on 1800 block James St. Officer responded to citizens' reports of baby crying" (375).

The image of the jungle that so often chases Lena is, in fact, the image of the room in the orphanage where she stayed after being released from Lyons hospital (its walls painted with jungle trees), and the ape mother is in reality her favorite toy at the orphanage, a stuffed monkey. Thus, Lena's search for her origins leads to the assumption that she will probably never find them. Her roots stretch to a dumpster, to a heap of trash. One day, as she walks in the street where she was found as a baby, she meets a Greek immigrant who has been running a small drugstore at that place since 1949. When she questions him about a child found in the dumpster, he says:

"Some stories—sometimes—" he says carefully, "shouldn't be told."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, the world is full of stories. They're like those—oh, what are they called? He rubs his thumb and forefinger together. "The lightning bugs." He flutters his fingers in the air. "Winking and flashing—off, on." He drops his hands then and says, "Some things it's better not to look at them. Yes? (383)

The story of Lena's origin does not reach its denouement. The reader never finds out what her ethnic background is. Abu-Jaber thus complicates the understanding of the Arab American label (or ethnic origin in general). As Salaita states, "[b]y not identifying any of her characters as Arab Abu-Jaber is making a specific political point in addition to an artistic choice. It is possible that she simply wanted to move away from being typecast as an ethnic author, but her choice not to name Arabs ultimately reinforces the importance of culture and identity in literature" (*Modern Arab* 107). Abu-Jaber might not be telling a story about some specific ethnic origin; she might not be discussing the conflict between the Arab/Chinese/Mexican etc. and American sides of the hyphen; she might not be reflecting on the problem of the divided sense of one's self; however, she is touching on the concept of identity. The problem of being labeled as one thing does not correspond with the idea of fingerprints – the area in which Lena specializes. Being labeled as something automatically classifies a person within a certain group – racial, ethnic, religious, etc. Labels, therefore, do not match fingerprints, which are always unique. At one point in the novel, Lena reflects on prints which are "completely our own, unique down to the individual features to each individual ridge. Twins have their own fingerprints. Babies are born with the prints they'll grow into" (25). Fingerprints point to the fact that every person is unique. The premise of a rigid classification to a particular group, therefore, lacks justification. The identity that Abu-Jaber describes goes to the primary and essential identity of the human being, which stands above any ethnic labels.

The resolution of the novel is accompanied by the signs of oncoming spring. Syracuse, beaten by harsh winter and snow throughout the novel, warms up, the snow melts and uncovers the earth, which for Lena represents a "sultry beauty" (384). Despite living in the

“furnished rooms” (384) of the civilized world, Lena feels that her ape mother still keeps visiting her:

Even now, though I work in an office and spend my life in furnished rooms, the ape mother still visits me. She is still my comfort. She runs her fingers through my hair, above us the circling twirl of transparent butterflies, the lazy, long-legged drift of a blue dotted wasp. Sun-yellow birds and wide-toed lizards come to converse with us. The days are filled with their sweet chattering: all day and all night are filled with their languages, reminding us of who we are and where we came from. (384)

“The sultry beauty” of the earth points to an earth-born (which is a synonym of human, mortal) understanding of identity, the identity of a human being that is like fingerprints: singular, unique, unmatched, one of a kind – an identity which eludes borders and labels. The search for this identity is always unique, as is the technique that Abu-Jaber chose to communicate her message. The genre of the detective story that can be read in two distinct layers, with a plotline revolving around the search for the origin of the killer as well as the origin of the detective, can be seen as a parallel to Werner Sollors’s idea of ethnicity, which is not “an ancient and deep-seated force surviving from the historical past but rather the modern and modernizing feature of a contrasting strategy that may be shared far beyond the boundaries within which it is claimed” (“Introduction” xiv). In other words, ethnicity should not be searched for in one’s past (origin), as it is not something stable or final. It is not a product but a process. The concept of ethnicity as a product of one’s origin is thus replaced with the concept of ethnicity as a process which is always original, never fixed or final: “It is not a thing but a process – and it requires constant detective work from readers, not a settling on a fixed encyclopedia of supposed cultural essentials” (Sollors, “Introduction” xv). Similarly, Abu-Jaber does not see ethnicity in origin and descent, but rather in original detective investigation and consent.

Conclusion: Literary Labels

The narrative about Lena Dawson might be read as an analogy of the story of an American writer who is being labeled as ethnic because of his (or her) origin. Pointing to the writer’s origin often tempts the reader not to regard the literary works of this author as original. These books are automatically categorized under the label of ethnic just because of a sense of exoticism that the name of their author connotes. Subsequently, they are read as histories or cultural documentaries, not as “his stories” (or her stories) and literary works. Abu-Jaber is not saying that we should completely do away with the notion of ethnic literature; what she suggests is that the label of an ethnic writer should be a matter of consent, not descent; that it should be the result of the author’s individual journey, creation, or artistic choice. After all, the term Arab American writer is a complicated concept. It includes Muslims (Sunnis, Shiites, etc.), Christians, Jews, atheists; reformers and conservatives; people living in an urban setting as well as those living in rural areas, etc. As Rebecca Layton points out, what these authors share is their concern to do away with stereotypes so as to be perceived as distinctive, unique literary voices: “While many of these writers integrate

elements of their cultural heritage into their works, they are often burdened with the added task of breaking free of these concerns and labels in an effort to establish their own unique authorial presence” (9).

In her other books (even the ones which were written after *Origin*)⁹ Abu-Jaber does not refrain from pointing to her Arab American hyphenated identity. The irony of *Origin* is that it does not point to a particular ethnic origin; origin in the novel is the origin of every individual, which is unique, mixed, and original; its identification requires the subtle detective work of a “fingerprint specialist” (which might still lead to a story that is like a flashing lightning bug and that should not be told). Analogically, the irony of being ascribed the label of an “ethnic writer” is that it does not point to any specific ethnic origin (as suggested by the ethnicity-for-all principle). Like more recent definitions of ethnicity which state that belonging to “an ethnic group could be at least partly voluntary by using words ‘allegiance’ and ‘association’ rather than limiting membership strictly to origins” (Martin 4), for Abu-Jaber ethnicity in writing is likewise a matter of individual choice, and it may vary not only between individual authors but also in the case of several works by the same author. In other words, a book is a word fingerprint, and its identification (or labeling) should draw on the author’s consent.

Notes

¹ Some of the most influential literary journals focusing on Arab American writing include *Al Jadid: A Review and Record of Arab Culture and Arts* and *Mizna*.

² Al Maleh is referring to the period from 1924 to the beginning of the 1970s. The 1924 Johnson-Reed Quota Act limited the number of new immigrants to the USA. Arab American writing at the time was characterized by self-distancing strategies and a general tendency towards assimilation.

³ Critics like Edward Said, Steven Salaita, Wail S. Hassan, Khaled Mattawa, or Lisa Suhair Majaj.

⁴ *Mahjar* is derived from the Arabic verb *hajara* (to leave, to emigrate); *Mahjar* is often translated as emigration or exodus, but the term is generally used to denote Arab authors who began to leave Lebanon in the last decades of the 19th century.

⁵ See Hamid’s *Circus* (1950).

⁶ See Rizk’s *Syrian Yankee* (1943).

⁷ In their introductory chapter to *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), the editors stress that in the process of preparing the first modern anthology of Arab American literature, they were encouraging cross-genre experiments as they believe that formal changes “are important signifiers of changes in both subject matter and tactics” (xiii).

⁸ Charlie is Lena’s former husband, who divorced her.

⁹ As an example, we could mention her food memoirs *The Language of Baklava* (2006) or *Life without a Recipe* (2016).

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