

**“The way to someone’s heart is through their stomach”:
Anti-Orientalism in the Cookbooks of Habeeb Salloum**

Amani Khelifa

Abstract

Immigrant writing is a unique forum that provides insight into both immigrant and mainstream life, where authors serve as brokers between two cultures. This is especially true of the two most personal genres, cookbooks and memoirs, where culture and family history are directly discussed. The writing of Arab-Canadian author Habeeb Salloum (1924-2019) combined both genres. His cookbook-memoirs fostered intercultural dialogue and combatted Orientalist stereotypes. This article examines how he practiced decolonization using three techniques: first, by assimilating into stereotypes of ‘Oriental’ culture; then, by retrieving Orientalist tropes and recasting them into positive aspects of Middle Eastern culture; and, finally, by attempting to position Arab minorities as allies of Indigenous communities. By revealing how Salloum succeeded, and sometimes failed, to push an anti-Orientalist agenda in his cookbooks, this study reinforces the central role that food and memoirs play in shaping the identities and experiences of individuals, communities, and nations.

Keywords: Food history, Orientalism, Arab-Canadian identity, immigrant memoirs, cookbooks, prairie history, decolonization, Indigenous-minority relations

To understand a people, acquaint yourself with their proverbs.”

– Arab proverb¹

“The more you eat, the more we know how much you love us.”

– Arab proverb²

The language of food is the most basic, universal language. It can also be the most political. As a medium for cross-cultural dialogue, its exchange can lead to the breakdown of barriers and a reconfiguration of power dynamics.³ Food and the practices surrounding it function as markers of group, national and imperial identities, often carried and spread through cookbooks.⁴ Habeeb Salloum (1924-2019) was an Arab-Canadian writer and author of several cookbooks that foster

¹ Habeeb Salloum, *Arab Cooking on a Saskatchewan Homestead: Recipes and Recollections* (Regina: University of Regina Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2005), 1.

² Habeeb Salloum, *Bison Delights: Middle Eastern Cuisine, Western Style* (Regina: University of Regina Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2010), 89.

³ Franca Iacvetta, Marlene Epp, and Valerie J. Korinek, *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 11.

⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

intercultural dialogue and test the boundaries between Arab and Canadian cooking. As an immigrant from the Middle East to Saskatchewan in the 1920s and 1930s, and as a writer, Salloum found himself uniquely positioned to be a cultural broker with the ability to “serve up [his] ethnic culture for Canadian consumption.”⁵ His recipes acted as vehicles for anti-Orientalism by bridging the gap in readers’ minds between ‘the Orient’ and ‘the Occident’. This article analyzes Salloum’s cookbooks with the aim of uncovering how he practiced decolonization as a mechanism to create, share, and market Middle Eastern foods to Western audiences. After contrasting decolonization and anti-Orientalism as joint but distinct frameworks, especially as they relate to food history, I examine Salloum’s cookbooks to uncover the decolonial techniques woven into the recipes. I argue his writing reveals three major decolonizing ‘moves’:

1. the assimilationist tendency, which highlights one’s hyphenated identity (in this case Arab Canadian), selectively emphasizing, by turns, the right and left side of the hyphen;⁶
2. the reclamation move, or the retrieval of Orientalist representations from their Western provenance; and
3. the coalition tendency within social justice, where one attempts to ally with other disadvantaged groups, in this case with Indigenous communities.

Salloum’s maturation and assimilation as a Canadian author is clearly traceable over the course of his three cookbooks. It tells the story of a newcomer carving out a shard for himself in the notoriously complex mosaic of Canadian identity and history.

At the Crossroads of Decolonization and Anti-Orientalism: The Incommensurability of the Intersectional

Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify how I intend to use the term “decolonization”. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explain in their seminal article, decolonization is a term that has been overused, misused, and abused to the point that it has become a catch-all phrase which can simultaneously mean everything and nothing. To avoid the danger of decolonization becoming a “metaphor”, they provide a definition of the term that centres land repatriation.⁷ Any definition that ignores the element of land effectively recasts (whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously) settler colonial claims to land and resources – and all the concomitant power structures, systems of oppression, and imperial ways of seeing – in a new, more palatable guise.

This definition is key to any history of food. Food is inseparable from land. Food justice advocate Zoe Matties writes that Canada’s “origin story” is ultimately one about, “land gained by settler

⁵ Ibid, 21.

⁶ Sherman Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.

⁷ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1.

people, and land lost to Indigenous peoples”.⁸ Because food production is inevitably tied to land access and management, the story of food mirrors the story of land: it is a story of foodways gained by settler people, and lost to Indigenous peoples. I say “foodways” and not “food” because the very assumption of food as a finite resource – nothing more than a by-product of an environment ‘out there’ to be managed in a zero-sum game of diminishing returns – reveals a Eurocentric bias that views food, like land, as a commodity. Yet, in my view, neither land nor its ‘byproducts’ can be individually ‘owned’ or parceled out; they are less products of a material world, and more the after-effects of relationships with living, interconnected beings.

This brings me to an important juncture where I must situate myself and reflect on why I am writing this piece. I am not indigenous to North America. I write as a relative newcomer and therefore settler to North America, even as I recognize and continue to bear my (doubly) colonized past from another continent. These experiences do not entitle me to insert myself into the decolonizing efforts of another context, or to comment on the struggle of others who have tried to do so before me. What pushes me to proceed is the intuition that decolonization is not something any one of us can ‘opt out’ of. We all exist and subsist on land, in land, and with land. Whether we choose to acknowledge or disregard that relationship does not make it any less real. Despite my discomfort with the task at hand, I hope that my background and thought on this topic have provided me with the sensitivity to make my observations, however tentative, in the spirit of inviting further conversation.

At the heart of this article is a question of solidarity, allyship, and intersectional social justice – indeed, the very viability of all of these is at stake. As both settler and immigrant, I find myself grappling with the many ‘faces’ of colonialism, as did Salloum a generation before me. Immigrants have the unique experience of being displaced by (neo)colonialism in one time and place, only to find themselves dispossessing other people in another time and place. Even though the benefits of being a settler are not distributed evenly or experienced similarly by people of colour, the result is the same – all “occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land”.⁹ As Tuck and Yang observe, “This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler colonial forces”.¹⁰

Sitting with these overlapping tensions and frictional identities is difficult, but if we accept that decolonization is supposed to be unsettling, then perhaps that is a sign that we are doing something right. Resisting the tendency to collapse all social justice work into a single, overarching umbrella of coalition politics is perhaps a first step to decolonizing the sphere for both academics and practitioners. It challenges the tendency to see ourselves in a single, non-normative category of ‘Other’. This move, which Tuck and Yang call “colonial equivocation”, is counterproductive in

⁸ Zoe Matties, “Unsettling Settler Food Movements: Food Sovereignty and Decolonization in Canada” *Cuisine: The Journal of Canadian Food Cultures* 7, no. 2 (2016): par. 2.

⁹ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 7.

that it levels all social justice causes and erases the distinctions of each struggle.¹¹ It can also have the inadvertent effect of pitting different causes against each other. Comparing what are fundamentally incommensurate experiences perpetuates a kind of hierarchy of suffering and a case of ‘who has it worse’ of colonial violence. As such, for the purposes of this article, I bear in mind that decolonization on the one hand, and anti-Orientalism on the other, are related but ultimately separate projects. Each is discrete, unique, and must be assessed on its own terms. Connections can be made, parallels drawn and noted, but the root impulse remains to “attend to what is irreconcilable” and maintain “what is incommensurable”,¹² rather than to collapse, conflate, or make a melting pot of colonial grievances. When in doubt, I will attempt to “unsettle [my own] innocence”¹³ and recognize my privilege wherever and however much of it exists.

The struggles I face as an immigrant today are in many ways like those Salloum grappled with a generation or two ago, although he did not operate in the same “logosphere”¹⁴ or use the same language to name and identify his experiences. This raises the question of the extent to which it is helpful or, indeed, even feasible, to label Salloum as a decolonizing or anti-Orientalist writer if he did not identify himself as such. While his cookbooks, published between 2005 and 2013, were released after these terms came to have their present-day significance (roughly in the 1960 and 1970s),¹⁵ they represent a lifetime of reflecting on his experiences, from the 1930s to the 2010s. The question is: is doing so an anachronism?

At least for Edward Said, the answer can be found in the definition of Orientalist he himself provides: “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹⁶ This “style of domination” existed long before it was recognized and named. His labeling of an ancient Greek play like Aeschylus’s *The Persians*, for example, as “Orientalist” is a back-projection to understand what the phenomenon of Orientalism is. Does Said read Orientalism into the vast corpus of literary and political works he studies? Is it a genuine discovery within the texts or is it equally a creation imposed upon them from without? This is ultimately a line of inquiry that concerns hermeneutics, but for the purposes of this article, I resist taking an ‘either/or’ resolution of this question and opt instead for a

¹¹ Ibid, 17.

¹² Ibid, 4.

¹³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴ Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002): 12.

¹⁵ “Orientalism” was coined by Edward Said in 1978. “Decolonization” as a term is harder to date. I refer here not to the process of colonial governments ‘granting’ independence to ex-colonies, but rather the growing recognition of the need to decolonize language, literature, culture, even the mind. Globally, many scholars have marked the movement with the publication of Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961. In the Canadian context, some commentators single out the 1972 policy paper “Indian Control of Indian Education” prepared by the Assembly of First Nations (then the National Indian Brotherhood) for the Ministry of Indian Affairs and Northern Development as a landmark work.

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978): 11.

‘both/and’ approach. As I delve into his writing, I invite you to think of Salloum’s cookbooks both as prototypical anti-Orientalist works as well as a living repertoire that can be drawn from and built on today, in a ‘post-Orientalism’ context. The same can be said of decolonial strategies prior to the emergence of “decolonization” as a technical term in the social sciences.

Nevertheless, my suggested labeling should still be taken with a grain of salt. Consider it a method for experimenting with what might happen, should we read Salloum’s cookbooks using this lens. One thing, however, should be clear. In identifying the ways in which Salloum’s writing and thought is ‘decolonial’ or ‘anti-Orientalist’, the goal is not to impose modern sensibilities onto a different time and then proceed to critique him on that basis, but rather to explore how some of the earliest Arab immigrants to this country engaged with and navigated the colonial legacy they unwittingly inherited. That Salloum noted the “exponentially complicated” nature of colonial systems¹⁷ before the language existed to name them both speaks to the thorough embeddedness of the colonial enterprise while at the same time foreshadowing his missteps.

Salloum’s family emigrated during the interwar years, after a grueling journey from what was then Greater Syria. They were part of several waves of Arab immigration to Canada that took place from 1892 to the Second World War.¹⁸ Most Arab immigrants settled in Ontario or Quebec, making Salloum’s parents outliers who instead homesteaded in Saskatchewan and mostly worked as peddlers.¹⁹ When they first set foot in the prairies in 1928, the Arab population in Canada was between 10,000 and 15,000.²⁰

A decade before their arrival, in 1908, immigration policy restrictions had been relaxed to facilitate the wave of immigration that ultimately brought Salloum and his family. Prior to 1908, “immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada,” including Arabs who were then classified under the category of Asiatics,²¹ were prevented from settling in Canada. Other measures designed to limit immigrants from the Middle East and especially South Asia included restrictions against those whose route to Canada included stopovers, a requirement to have a minimum of \$200 upon arrival, and a broader, vaguely codified reluctance to admit people of “Asiatic” race.²²

The following decades would witness a fight to lift restrictive immigration laws, in which Salloum played the part of intermediary in his role as editor of Arab journals and newsletters in the 1930s

¹⁷ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 7.

¹⁸ Darcy Zabel, *Arabs in the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora*, (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2006), 8.

¹⁹ Baha Abu-Laban, “Economic Adaptation of Arab-Canadians,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (1979): 201.

²⁰ Houda Asal, “Transnationalism, State’s Influence, and the Political Mobilizations of the Arab Minority in Canada,” trans. Sarah Abel, in *A Century of Transnationalism: Immigrants and Their Homeland Connections*, eds. Nancy L. Green and Roger David Waldinger, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 164.

²¹ *Ibid*, 164.

²² Brian Aboud, “Re-Reading Arab World-New World Immigration History: Beyond the Prewar/Postwar Divide,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 26, no. 4 (2000): 653–73; Baha Abu-Laban, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: The Arabs in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980), 65-7; Asal, “Transnationalism,” 167.

and as a participant in civic associations like the Canadian-Arab Friendship Society (CAFS) in the 1960s.²³ Their struggles came to fruition in the 1967 *Immigration Act* which stated that “the citizens of most Middle Eastern countries...be treated as Europeans rather than Asians.”²⁴ The significance of the legal Europeanization of Arabs relates to their ongoing struggles to socially and culturally Canadianize, that is become (Euro-)Canadians, a topic Salloum engages with directly in his culinary decolonization agenda. His debut cookbook, *Arab Cooking on a Saskatchewan Homestead*, demonstrates this assimilationist tendency most clearly.

The Hyphenated Homesteader in *Arab Cooking*

Of Salloum’s three cookbooks, *Arab Cooking on a Saskatchewan Homestead* (2005) is the earliest. Salloum details his family history during the homesteading years with a different food item to set up each chapter, featuring titles like “Burghul: The Cornerstone of Our Diet in the Depression Years” and “The Joys of Saskatoons during our Farming Years”. The preface makes clear that, for Salloum, the motivation behind writing the book was driven by a desire to establish and normalize the narrative of Arab settlement in Canada. The central message emphasized in the preface and repeated throughout the book is that the Arab “saga is no different from many other tales in [Western] Canada.”²⁵ Salloum lamented that while “[m]uch has been written about the innumerable ethnic minorities that make up the Canadian mosaic...one must search almost in vain to find the Arab element in the picture.”²⁶ In writing the microhistory of his own family, Salloum hoped to vocalize the missing experiences of Arab homesteaders in mainstream thought and illustrate that Arab experiences were, in fact, representative of the broader Canadian one.

To this end, Salloum describes his experience growing up in 1930s Saskatchewan in a way that stresses its Canadianness. For instance, he describes the trajectory of his childhood and adolescent years, taking readers through his humble prairie school days, to trapping as a teenager, to his eager excitement for visits to town. Likewise, his passage to manhood was duly marked by his first move to a big city, Moose Jaw, to attend the Technical Institute and his service with the Royal Canadian Air Force during the Second World War.²⁷ He describes his eagerness to permanently settle down in a metropolis and he and his siblings’ successful relocation to urban centres from Vancouver to Toronto. In some ways, the broad themes of this story, from the fight of ‘man against nature’ to settlement and urbanization, are themselves reminiscent of a colonial trajectory.

While the broad strokes of his story read no differently from many boys and young men in Saskatchewan at the time, Salloum takes care to embellish and add enough detail to remind his readers that, as Canadian as his story was, it was nonetheless *Arab-Canadian*. For instance, as a child, his equivalent of Lewis Carroll’s bedtime tales was listening to his parents’ tell the story of

²³ Ibid, 174.

²⁴ Zabel, *Arabs in the Americas*, 8.

²⁵ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, vii.

²⁶ Ibid, vii.

²⁷ Ibid, 9.

their long journey from Qaraoun, their home village in mandate Syria-Lebanon, through France to Saskatchewan.²⁸ In the same vein, Salloum revisits memories of the lunches his mother would prepare, food he was embarrassed to eat in front of his peers with their “neat sandwiches.”²⁹ While neighbours and visitors would look forward to exotic dishes his mother cooked like roasted rabbit, Salloum would crave bologna.³⁰ Even his descriptions of the weather were not excluded from this two-way treatment. Salloum poetically recalls, “As a youth in Saskatchewan I remember thinking, / Why did my parents come and bring us in tow, / From the far Syrian desert with sands blowing, / To the Saskatchewan desert of wind and snow?”³¹ Similarly, in painting the scene of the Dust Bowl for his readers, Salloum writes “the soil blew back and forth like the deserts of Arabia,”³² invoking the recurring image of an Arabian desert night, even as he used it to describe a Saskatchewan landscape.

Salloum’s knack for drawing lines between ‘East’ and ‘West’ in clever, insightful ways extends beyond personal anecdotes and lyrical weather forecasts to the recipes themselves. In the blurbs before each recipe, we can find Salloum comparing English chips drizzled in vinegar and North American fries drenched in ketchup, to the Arab version of “fried potatoes with garlic and lemon.”³³ He shares recipes for Christmas *baklawa*, and reminds farmers who are left with hundreds of pumpkins after Halloween that they can always turn to making pumpkin *kubba*.³⁴ He even compares *kubba* to Australian tartares and *tajines* to French *etouffe*.³⁵ Occasionally, his parallels between Western and Middle Eastern cuisines go so far as to declare the Arab version superior. As an example, “qawarma scrambled eggs makes [such] a fine breakfast dish...it puts bacon and eggs to shame.”³⁶ According to Salloum, Arabs stews cannot compare to their Western counterparts because they “generate a delicate texture...which most Western stews fail to produce.”³⁷ Meanwhile, Iraqi and Iranian *kufta* simply “puts the standard North American hamburger and all its relatives to shame.”³⁸ Sometimes, Salloum uses Western figures to endorse the unmatched merits of a particular food, like when he tells us that Charlemagne loved fenugreek so much, he had it grown on his imperial farms.³⁹ Later, he recounts the story of an North African student and friend studying at the Sorbonne who found the couscous prepared in French restaurants to be better-tasting and more authentic than North African restaurants, proving that “couscous had become an integral part of the French kitchen.”⁴⁰ With these constant references to Western

²⁸ Ibid, 2.

²⁹ Ibid, 41.

³⁰ Ibid, 273.

³¹ Ibid, 1.

³² Ibid, 5.

³³ Ibid, 210.

³⁴ Ibid, 38.

³⁵ Salloum, *Bison Delights*, 85.

³⁶ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 108.

³⁷ Ibid, 220.

³⁸ Ibid, 120.

³⁹ Salloum, *Bison Delights*, 99.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 126.

traditions in his recipes for Middle Eastern food, Salloum balances the twin strategies of “domesticating and foreignizing,” of making his food and anecdotes familiar as well as as making them exotic (enough).⁴¹ This balancing act in itself indicates that to be the cultural translator he presents himself as, it was necessary for Salloum to indulge his readers in the new – Arabness – without losing sight of the bedrock of Saskatchewanness, Canadianness, or Westernness that they shared.

The ‘East/West’ juggling act applies just as much to trends in the narrative of each food staple Salloum weaves at the start of each chapter. Each section includes a brief history of the food, tracing how it moved from ancient times to the modern day, finally arriving in the Middle East and North America. Often, Middle Eastern foods were introduced to Europe via medieval Spain or carried to North America by immigrants or African slaves. After painting a rough historical image, Salloum follows up by sharing relevant family anecdotes of the dish, outlining its health benefits and almost always ending by redeeming the food from the days in his youth when he was too embarrassed to indulge in it. Each of these steps acknowledges the ‘West’ as a framework and standard, and in doing so, shortens the distance between ‘East’ and ‘West’ to make the Arab more accessible. As an example, Salloum points out that many words for foods and spices are Arabic in origin.⁴² He describes the equivalent of Latin America’s ‘Three Sisters’ subsistence food which, in an Arab kitchen, are chickpeas, lentils and burghul. He draws on Western biomedicine to explain the health benefits of Arab foods, like garlic, quoting the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, studies done at American research centres, and historical figures of Western science like Louis Pasteur.⁴³ Salloum refers to the growing prevalence of Arab foods in supermarkets and health food stores in the West as if to indicate the value of these foods. In this twist of using Western biomedicine to validate age-old Middle Eastern knowledge, Salloum recognizes biomedicine as the standard and works within its parameters, using it as a measure of credibility and socio-political currency to further his goals of integrating Middle Eastern food – and people – into the existing structure. Whether it is French monarchs or Western biomedicine, Salloum consistently adopts accepted norms to situate himself squarely in Saskatchewan, Canadian, and European history.

Reclaiming the Mythical ‘Orient’ in *Sweet Delights* and *Scheherazade’s Feasts*

Throughout his cookbooks, Salloum draws on stereotypical images of ‘the Orient’ to draw in a popular audience, even using “Orient” and “Middle East” interchangeably at times.⁴⁴ A reader has only to glance at the titles *Sweet Delights from One Thousand and One Nights* (2010) and *Scheherazade’s Feasts* (2013) to see Salloum wielding these symbols. The former work is a compilation of Arab desserts dating back to the Middle Ages while the latter lists both sweet and

⁴¹ Wail Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

⁴² James Peter and Habeeb Salloum, *Arabic Contributions to the English Vocabulary* (Selbstverl., 1973), viii; Salloum, *Bison Delights*, 88.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 116.

⁴⁴ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 123.

savory recipes from medieval Arab centres in Iberia, Persia and the Near East, concluding with a menu of items fit for a caliph's table.

The most oft-repeated Orientalist trope Salloum's cookbooks refer to is Arab hypersexuality. An overwhelming number of foods and spices are associated with sex and fertility. Among them are nutmeg which, according to Salloum, "has always been regarded highly as an aphrodisiac...[that] the Yemenites consume in large amounts to increase fertility."⁴⁵ Another is chickpeas, "a cure for impotence and a first-rate sexual stimulant."⁴⁶ Speaking of the benefits of olive oil for complexion, he invokes the image of Cleopatra who "always had an olive oil massage before her trysts with Caesar and Anthony."⁴⁷ On numerous occasions, Salloum references a twelfth-century Arab sex manual called *The Perfumed Garden* to assert that one or another vegetable or spice has been used as a sexual stimulant since the ancient Arabs. Even visual depictions of dinners in Arab countries are steeped in this language, such as this vivid portrayal of a meal in Yemen: "When we arrived, it seemed that we had landed in one of the stories in *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. The mouth-watering aromas float[ed] around us...as we feasted on the foods of this ancient land from whence hailed the Queen of Sheba."⁴⁸ At times, Salloum is so bold as to promise that the pages of his cookbook "will titillate the palate."⁴⁹

Salloum's application of these run-of-the-mill Orientalist tropes raises the question: to what extent is Orientalism performed by an 'Oriental' empowering? Wail Hassan, scholar of Arab literature and intellectual history, explains the predicament of Arab writers who find themselves with no choice but to engage directly with Orientalism, the literary elephant in the room. They must "validate Orientalism or risk being ignored by publishers, reviewers or readers."⁵⁰ Operating in the space between two worlds, Salloum and others in his position find both a threat and opportunity in the prevailing stereotypes of Arab people. Even though Orientalism "condemn[s] them to an inferior position in the cultural hierarchy...it also afford[s] them an entry into the [Canadian] scene."⁵¹ So long as he navigated these two spheres successfully, Salloum could use popular Orientalist symbols to gain enough credibility within the mainstream imperial structure before pursuing an opposite agenda.

The consequence of facing Orientalism head-on is a taking back of the stereotypical language and imagery of harems, hypersexualized Arabs, and sexual deviance from their Western origins and regaining control of Orientalist representations and their meanings. Salloum revisits with fresh eyes the same harems, orchids and caliphs' courts tainted by negative associations of Orientalism, and instead appreciates them for the extent of their medical knowledge, the ingenuity of their

⁴⁵ Ibid, 123.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 76.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 175.

⁴⁸ Salloum, *Bison Delights*, 66.

⁴⁹ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 237.

⁵⁰ Hassan, *Immigrant Narratives*, 13.

⁵¹ Ibid, 21.

architecture, or the sophistication of their cuisines.⁵² As such, ignoring dominant social views of Arabs – as discriminatory as they may be – still leaves control of them with the same hegemonic forces that ushered in colonization. Meanwhile, bringing them back into Arab jurisdiction begins the lengthy, uncomfortable process of divesting them of their proclaimed power and disarming them as stereotypes.

Regaining power of long-standing prejudices is no easy feat, especially considering the longevity of physical and psychological imperialism that left its mark in the minds of colonized peoples. Grappling with this ingrained inferiority complex forms a consistent theme in Salloum's writing. According to Salloum, his parents were convinced that their culture was inferior,⁵³ preferring to "keep their dishes hidden away...well-concealed should an unexpected neighbour arrive" because "Arabic food was something to be ashamed of."⁵⁴ Like other immigrants, Salloum's mother "believed that [Arab] food was not good enough for the palate of non-Syrians," opting instead to serve European dishes to her non-Arab guests.⁵⁵ The feeling of inferiority passed to the children, who, in ensuing years, "tried desperately to become part of the Anglo-Saxon world."⁵⁶ Their family, however, was not alone; Salloum tells us that most Syrian immigrants "wanted to become white," to be "undeniably Canadians."⁵⁷ Considering the anti-Arab climate where Salloum grew up, a time when articles in *Popular Science Monthly* called Middle Eastern homesteaders "parasites from the Near East [who] do not compare favourably even with the Chinese,"⁵⁸ it is no wonder that Salloum and his siblings were instilled with a strong desire to "Canadianize." Anglicising their names, hiding their ethnic recipes, and shunning their Arabness was an unfortunate, though unsurprising consequence of the anti-Arab and broader anti-immigrant rhetoric of the day.

Interestingly, food is sometimes saved from this culturally devastating tendency. Salloum notes that even as "Arabic virtually disappears amongst the third generation...all that remains are a few mispronounced words for items of food"⁵⁹ and a collection of fond memories of Arab cooking.⁶⁰ He jokingly (and no less profoundly) asserts that "traditions, language, and the Arab way of life all may be forgotten, but not the various types of kubbas."⁶¹ Research by sociologist Baha Abu-Laban corroborates this. Abu-Laban's study found that the aspect of culture most likely to be

⁵² Habeeb Salloum, Muna Salloum, and Leila Salloum Elias, *Sweet Delights from a Thousand and One Nights: The Story of Traditional Arab Sweets* (London: IB Tauris, 2010), 6; Habeeb Salloum, Muna Salloum, and Leila Salloum Elias, introduction to *Scheherazade's Feasts: Foods of the Medieval Arab World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁵³ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, vii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 18-19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 253.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 18.

retained by descendants of Arab immigrants is cooking and eating Arab food.⁶² For Salloum, it was exposure to urban life, travel, and education that brought him to treasure his roots once again: “The city and its educational institutions gave me the *dignity* that my homesteading years had erased” (emphasis added). A growing knowledge of Arab contributions and accomplishments made Salloum proud “to tell the world about this renowned civilization”⁶³ and sparked a lifelong commitment to reviving his Arab heritage and writing these cookbooks in the process. Looking back, Salloum reflects on “how foolish [they] were” to conceal their Arab dishes and Arab identities instead of acquainting others with them.⁶⁴ Reasserting ownership over the recipes he now shares widely with non-Arab readers, the same recipes that he once shunned in favour of becoming more Euro-Canadian, brings Salloum full circle. This cycle of rejection followed by transformation is characteristic of the decolonizing process. Salloum takes back the same symbols, narratives, and foods that signified for him Arab inferiority and uses them as a means of elevation and revitalization.

“Colonial Equivocation” in *Bison Delights*

Combined with the strategies of, on one hand, adopting narratives of the ‘West’ in general and the Canadian West in particular, and on the other, recovering representations of the Orient, Salloum’s final decolonizing move is the most complex – he attempts to create an affiliation between Arab struggles and the plight of Indigenous people. This is especially clear in *Bison Delights* (2010), a cookbook based entirely on this premise. The front jacket asserts that differences between ‘East’ and ‘West’ can perhaps be reconciled using the history of Indigenous communities as a ‘case study’ to draw parallels: “Middle East and Prairie West meet – deliciously – in this cookbook of over 100 bison recipes.” In the recipes that follow, Salloum seems to make the gastronomical argument that, if something as Arab as *kubba* and as Western and North American as bison can come together to make a delicious culinary masterpiece, then perhaps also the meeting of ‘East/West’ does not have to entail a “clash of civilizations.”⁶⁵

To this end, Salloum retells history in such a way that connects the Arab minority in Canada with Indigenous Canadians in the minds of his readers. In providing the historical background of Arab nomads and Plains First Nations in his introduction to entrées, he concludes by stating, “The recipes that follow...arise out of and pay homage to the rich culinary histories of both the Middle East and the Prairie West, and they promise to delight the sophisticated, modern diner even as they nourished and sustained *our* ancestors in both hemispheres for hundreds of generations” (emphasis added).⁶⁶ He directly conflates the two histories and even the ancestral chains of Arab and Indigenous people. Salloum likewise echoes sentiments expressed in *Arab Cooking* in discussing

⁶² Abu-Laban, *An Olive Branch*, 213-14.

⁶³ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 16.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 88.

⁶⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

⁶⁶ Salloum, *Bison Delights*, 104.

the health benefits of Arab staples when he explains that Indigenous people, too, were aware of the nutritional value of bison meat, even though it has been recently ‘discovered’ in mainstream cooking.⁶⁷ In doing so, he suggests that both Arab and Indigenous communities share a history of culinary disenfranchisement that brings them together and is only beginning to be remedied in Western kitchens today.

Interestingly, *Bison Delights* seems to be missing a critical discussion or acknowledgement of the significance of buffalo to the Indigenous communities with whom Salloum attempts to ally. The decimation of bison populations in the prairies went together with the genocide of First Nations. James Daschuk, in an award-winning study of Indigenous health on the plains, goes further in stating the “disappearance of bison” was “the single greatest environmental catastrophe” to strike the region.⁶⁸ Not only was bison a key species in prairie ecology and bison meat a central subsistence food for Plains communities, but the buffalo is also sacred to the cosmologies of many First Nations, including the Lakota and Cree.⁶⁹ As interdisciplinary researcher Danielle Mamers observes, colonialism operates (and continues to operate) in the way in which relationships between humans and non-humans are characterized and ordered. The commodification of plants and animals and the refusal to see them as anything more than property is a form of intellectual colonialism that “[reproduces] settler colonial claims, institutions, and lifeways.”⁷⁰ Arguably, Salloum’s oversight in privileging a ‘secular’, non-spiritual, or disembodied view of bison perpetuates a settler worldview of human/non-human relations. This view places humans at the top of a pyramid of species and sees humans as transcendent ‘masters’ over the environment, instead of one species among many, all woven into it and acting within it as much as it acts on them.

Elsewhere, Salloum attempts to strike an Arab-Indigenous alliance by acknowledging his own prejudices and sharing his experience ‘unlearning’ much of what he internalized as a child. Part of the Canadianization discussed above involved reusing the same stereotypes and imitating the same racist thinking of those “[he] thought were real Canadians”⁷¹ in his youth. Consider the two passages below:

Feeling inferior, we [copied] everything our classmates said or did. This was especially true when it came to our attitudes of First Nations people. Even when we were by ourselves, we wanted to be accepted as real Canadians which, in our minds at that time, meant looking down on others, and who was better to bash than the Indians?⁷²

⁶⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁶⁸ James Daschuk, *Clearing the Plain: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Aboriginal Life* (University of Regina Press, Regina: 2013), 99.

⁶⁹ Ken, Zontek, “Sacred Symbiosis: The Native American Effort to Restore the Buffalo Nation,” (PhD diss. University of Idaho, 2003), 4-5.

⁷⁰ Danielle Taschereau Mamers, “Human-Bison Relations as Sites of Settler Colonial Violence and Decolonial Resurgence,” *Humanimalia* 10, no. 2 (2019): 10.

⁷¹ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 7.

⁷² Ibid, 6.

We never dreamed that the land we lived on had been taken away from its millennia-old inhabitants...In our minds, the people who left these remains *were not humans like ourselves*. They were like fictitious characters in the tales from the *Arabian Nights* stories that our mother often related during the cold winter evenings.⁷³

Once again, in the second passage, Salloum indicates an immanent sense of solidarity between Arab and Indigenous struggles, in this case by pointing out that both have been victims of Western dehumanization and mystification, giving rise to Orientalized Arabs as well as “Dead Indians”⁷⁴ as Thomas King terms them – in either case, fictionalized versions of the ‘original’.

What is more, in the first passage, Salloum notes that in wanting to become ‘Canadian,’ he had to recycle the logic of supremacy and imitate imperial ways of seeing. By sharing this story, Salloum hoped to remedy the errors of his youth and dismantle Indigenous stereotypes in one stroke. Writing this cookbook was his way of coming to terms with the prejudices he grew up with and perhaps also compensating for them, while furthering his anti-Orientalist goals all along. His attempt to strike an Arab-Indigenous alliance of sorts is reminiscent of one of the “settler moves to innocence” discussed by Tuck and Yang, and cited above, called “colonial equivocation”. They describe it as the tendency to group “all struggles against imperialism as ‘decolonizing’ [which] creates a convenient ambiguity between decolonization and social justice work, especially among people of color, queer people, and other groups minoritized by the settler nation-state.”⁷⁵ Salloum attempts to gain currency and credibility for his own anti-Orientalist project by aligning himself with Indigenous decolonization efforts. The problem with this, however, is that by taking a “multicultural approach to oppressions”, one must inevitably remain silent on the points of contention between the two – the points of “incommensurability”⁷⁶ – such as the continued settling and occupying of Indigenous land by immigrants or “arrivants” themselves.⁷⁷ As Tuck and Yang observe, a “‘multicultural’ approach to oppressions” remains “ambivalent about minority / people of colour / colonized Others *as settlers*”⁷⁸ (emphasis in original).

Aside from the theoretical issues with conflating anti-Orientalism and decolonization, even if we were to take Salloum’s decolonizing strategy at face value, we would see that it still falls short. In fact, it is interesting to take note of when Salloum – perhaps unconsciously – fails to entirely reject imperial attitudes, retaining or reifying it in some way. For instance, in his depiction of 1930s Saskatchewan farm life, he re-perpetuates the empty land myth, an imperial creation that views the land as a blank slate ripe for the taking. Salloum repeatedly uses the descriptors of “virgin

⁷³ Ibid, 7, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2012).

⁷⁵ Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization,” 17.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 28.

⁷⁷ Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): xix.

⁷⁸ Tuck and Yang, 17.

land,” “barren land,” “unbroken prairie” and “empty land.”⁷⁹ Correspondingly, in his attempts to imply a shared experience between Arabs and Indigenous peoples and portray the latter in an empowering way, he paints an overly romantic and simplistic picture of their history. The preface of *Bison Delights* opens with these lines:

For eons herds of bison roamed, lords of the prairie space,
 Their life and actions barely hindered by the human race,
 Then strangers with fire-spitting weapons came
 To conquer the land and the majestic herds erase...
 These few lines tell the sad tale of the North American bison.⁸⁰

Salloum makes similar remarks in *Arab Cooking*:

Following the migrating herds of buffalo from whom they derived almost all the necessities of life, they lived in a relatively secure world with their own laws, languages and religions. The culture in which they were immersed satisfied all their earthly and afterlife needs. However, since they left no records, by the time my parents and other newcomers had inherited their lands, it was as if they had never existed... [Comparing the decimation of Indigenous groups in the U.S. and Canada:] Canadian settlers were much more humane; they destroyed them unwittingly.⁸¹

Indigenous scholars, researchers, and activists could rightly take issue with the notion that their predecessors left no records. Salloum seems to presume that oral history is not a ‘valid’ method of preserving history, implicitly buying into the Eurocentric bias of favouring written and textual records over other, more embodied forms of memory. Likewise, he evokes the trope of the primitive, noble, peaceful Native (King’s “Dead Indians”), and even fatalistic views of European conquest. Unfortunately, Salloum’s take on Indigenous resistance is just as problematic: “After the defeat of the Riel Rebellion...the spirit of the proud Western Indian was broken...[he] lingered on the fringes of society.” According to Salloum, Plains First Nations were doomed to be “ensnared by the white man’s laws...never allow[ed] to climb out of the abyss in which they have fallen.”⁸² Such deterministic views – views that assume the inevitability of history, as well-intentioned as they may have been – demonstrate that even as Salloum wished to ally with Indigenous ‘victims,’ he inadvertently disempowered them by re-assigning them passive roles in the style of the very colonizers he sought to disarm. The imperial evidently runs far deeper than one might at first think and cannot be undone by the solitary efforts of one person.

Conclusion

⁷⁹ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 4.

⁸⁰ Salloum, *Bison Delights*, ix.

⁸¹ Salloum, *Arab Cooking*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid*, 7-8.

As a cultural broker, Salloum has much in common with many minority restaurant owners across Canada today who offer their patrons hybrid food items⁸³ from butter chicken poutine to tex mex perogies. Salloum wielded this powerful ability to “reinvent [Middle Eastern food] for the white Canadian palate and serv[e] up exotic versions of the Orient.”⁸⁴ He used it to tackle the stereotypes that drew in his readership to begin with. His earliest work, *Arab Cooking on a Saskatchewan Homestead*, is concerned primarily with highlighting the ordinary Canadian quality of his family’s homesteading experience from the difficult early days to successful harvests and from the Great Depression to urbanization. In later cookbooks including *Sweet Delights* and *Scheherazade’s Feasts*, Salloum’s attempts shift to turning Orientalist symbolism on its head by taking back ownership of iconic works like *One Thousand and One Nights* and representing them in new ways. Finally, Salloum links Arab and Indigenous experiences of colonization, exemplified in *Bison Delights*, to underscore the global nature of decolonizing efforts and the solidarity they require. Though it is questionable how far he succeeded in doing so, it nonetheless confirms the magnitude and ongoing, imperfect nature of the decolonizing task at hand.

The cookbook-memoirs of Habeeb Salloum illustrate that food is undoubtedly powerful. Immigrants, newcomers, and refugees to Canada continue to discover the value of food in breaking barriers, bridging gaps, and remembering the human side of ourselves in cases where it has been forgotten. Media coverage of pop-up Syrian restaurants is as a case in point. Take the caption of this *Globe and Mail* news article which reads “A couple of new Toronto businesses offering culinary delights from Aleppo and Damascus marks newcomers’ entrance into Canadian society – and stomachs.”⁸⁵ Salloum’s writing has made similar findings: decolonizing kitchens is perhaps the humble first step to decolonizing societies, and decolonizing stomachs might just as surely lead to decolonizing minds and hearts.

⁸³ Iacovetta, Epp, and Korinek, *Edible Histories*, 165.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 161.

⁸⁵ Eleanor Davidson, “Syrian Newcomers Using Food to Tell the Story of Home, Find Their Way in Canada.” *The Globe and Mail*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/food-and-wine/food-trends/syrian-newcomers-add-another-layer-to-canadian-foodidentity/article35842744/>.

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