

## Ancestral Voices and Family History in Frances Khirallah Noble's *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy*

By Ibis Gómez-Vega\*

In *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy*, Frances Khirallah Noble uses a ghost who returns not to "haunt" her grandson but to help him survive a horrendous ordeal. Simply because he is Syrian in America, Kahlil Gibran Hourani is targeted by "patriots" who see him as a terrorist, abduct him, and terrorize him. Kahlil's grandmother, his Situe, witnesses what happens to her grandson and resolves to help him. However, she does not help him escape, which is what he wants her to do; instead, she helps him by telling him three stories about his ancestors, two of which reveal that Kahlil's ancestors did not always make good choices. The grandmother's stories provide Kahlil with important historical information about his family as she attempts to explain to Kahlil that nothing in life is easy and that people often make hard choices in order to survive. Most of all, she wants him to understand that he also has choices that will reveal his true character. By the end of the novel, Kahlil has not only made important choices but he has also learned to value his grandmother's stories. He starts out in the novel as a man who has a very limited understanding of who he is as a Syrian in America, but by the end of the novel, he has made the right choices and returns home with his values intact, a new treasure trove of ancestral stories, his family's history, and a will to tell stories of his own.

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In Frances Khirallah Noble's *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* (2007), the ghost of Kahlil Gibran Hourani's grandmother, his Situe, appears to him multiple times throughout the novel. When he mentions the ghost of his Situe to his wife, Sophie, she sends him to the doctor who, in turn, sends him to a psychiatrist. Because Kahlil is fifty-three years old and has a tendency to fall asleep while making love to his wife, the psychiatrist asks him if "it's impotence which has driven you to such distraction?" Kahlil, completely unaware that admitting to seeing a ghost may not be better than being impotent, answers, "No, it's my Situe" (Noble 2007: 2). His admission that the ghost of his grandmother visits him and speaks to him introduces Noble's use of magical realism to restore what has been lost. Kahlil's grandmother's ghost returns from the dead to guide him throughout the horrifying ordeal that he is about to face simply because he looks like an Arab in post September 11 North America. She knows what is about to befall her beloved grandson, so she returns to teach him something that should give him a stronger sense of who he is as a Syrian in America. To achieve her purpose, Kahlil's grandmother tells him three stories, two of which reveal his ancestors' unsavory past even as Kahlil complains that what she is saying about his ancestors cannot possibly be true. Situe's truth is simple; she wants Kahlil to know that, whatever is done to him, he has options.

*The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* uses magical realism to examine the life of a Syrian American man who must live in a post September 11 landscape

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and navigate the irrational racism that he encounters. The novel also challenges assumptions previously made by scholars like Kathleen Brogan and Stephen M. Hart about the role played by ghosts in ethnic literature. These scholars have written convincingly about how ghosts help to resolve a painful past, but the past is not as painful as the present in this novel. In *Cultural Haunting*, Kathleen Brogan (1998: 23) points out that ethnic ghost stories are dedicated to the project of "cultural mourning" because these "haunted tales [...] bear witness to some sense of breach with the past", but *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* does not mourn the past. Instead, Kahlil has to somehow reconstruct his ancestors' history so that he can understand his new place in America. Kahlil is a third generation Syrian American who is not very conscious of having any connection to his Syrian past; his grandparents were the ones who immigrated to America, but he was born in California and he does not seem to know much about the family history. He names his optometry business The Oasis and decorates it with palm trees, but this is mostly a symbolic act because he has no conscious memory of a real oasis. Kahlil also admits that he really only remembers one of the stories told by his family members, the one about his grandfather being an orphan even though his mother was alive in Massachusetts.

In "Ghostly Presences", Lois Parkinson Zamora (1994: 118) points out that "ancestral apparitions often serve as correctives to the insularities of individuality, as links to lost families and communities". Kahlil's grandmother's ghost works to correct the insularity of Kahlil's individuality. She first appears to him in a dream that he later tries to explain to his psychiatrist. He tells the doctor that he "was asleep at home in my bed with my wife when this giant white bird, an eagle with piercing eyes, come [sic] down through the ceiling and landed right over me". The eagle asks him, "Do you want to see Situe again?" (Noble 2007: 2) in Arabic, a language that Kahlil barely understands, but he says yes to the eagle's question and soon is flown to heaven where he sees his "Situe sitting on a stool on a cloud" (Noble 2007: 3). Kahlil tells her that he "hoped [she] could answer a few questions", but before he has the chance to ask his questions, he is "startled out of my sleep by a terrible noise" which turns out to be "the gardener starting his blower below our bedroom window" (Noble 2007: 4). His magical dream of meeting with his grandmother is disrupted by a big blast of reality because *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy* meets Wendy Faris's most basic definition of magical realism, a text with "a preponderance of realism that includes irreducible elements of significant magic within it" (Faris 2002: 102).

The fact that reality startles Kahlil out of the dream in which he sees his grandmother is a realistic thing. People do wake when noise startles them. In Kahlil's dream, however, a few magical things were happening. First, Kahlil sees himself as a child when he sees that his "hands had become small and plump again" (Noble 2007: 3) as they were when he was a child and his Situe died. Then, the ghost basically asks permission to appear. Before taking Kahlil up to the sky to see his grandmother, the eagle asks him if he wants to see his Situe. The ghost does not intrude in his life until Kahlil says yes. The third

magical thing that happens is that Kahlil, who does not speak Arabic, understands the eagle speaking Arabic. Through this magical dream, Kahlil returns to his childhood, to the time when his Situe was alive, and he hears the family language that he had lost. These three magical moments stress exactly what Kahlil is missing at the beginning of the novel. At the age of fifty-three, he misses his youth and the grandmother whom he knew as a child; he is also missing an awareness of who he is as a Syrian in America, and this awareness is connected to his grandmother's absence from his life and his inability to understand Arabic, the language of his people.

Kahlil's story takes place at a time when "in the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially" (Alsultany 2013: 161). Evelyn Alsultany points out that "according to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001" (Alsultany 2013: 161). Carol Fadda-Conrey (2011: 541) explains that "the post-9/11 backlash against Arabs and Muslims in the US ultimately erases internal differences within the Arab American community, depicting all Arabs in the US (whether they are recent immigrants, second-, third-, or forth-generation Arab Americans, residents, or students and regardless of their varying political and religious beliefs) as the enemy or at least as a potential enemy". Kahlil may think that he is an American who cannot be subjected to abuse by the men who abduct him; he may claim that he has rights, but the men see him only as an Arab who could be dangerous. As Georgiana Banita (2010: 246) points out, "after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards". Because he is Syrian, an Arab in America, Kahlil becomes a victim to the hatred of others, but the novel also uses this sudden exposure to danger to provide Kahlil with his family's history. Kahlil will use the stories that his grandmother tells him to learn something about himself as an Arab. The ghost of his Situe comes back to give him the kind of knowledge that he needs to survive his current predicament, but he learns these stories as his own story unfolds.

As the novel opens, however, Kahlil's inability to understand Arabic or to remember his family's stories creates a problem about his sense of himself as an Arab because he lacks some of the most basic knowledge that would make him part of the group. Mohammed Albalawi (2015: 201) claims that, for Arabs, speaking Arabic is important because "Arabs are an ethnic group whose defining characteristic is the language", but Steven Salaita (2005: 149) also points out that "the Arabic language, for the most part, was not passed down from immigrants to children", which is exactly what happens to Kahlil. He tells his grandmother that his father "wanted to be an American" (Noble 2007: 89). His grandmother responds that "he could be both Arab and American" (Noble 2007: 89), but this was something that Kahlil's father did not think was available to him, and he, like other Syrian immigrants at the time, worked very hard to be classified as white. In "Becoming 'White': Race, Religion and the Foundations of Syrian/Lebanese Ethnicity in the United States", Sarah Gualtieri (2001: 30) documents the court battles and other struggles undertaken

by Syrian immigrants who "wanted to be recognized as white because it made them eligible for citizenship and the privileges it afforded". When the first court case was filed in September 1915, "Syrians wrote letters, published articles, hired lawyers, formed associations and raised money all to support the claim of whiteness" (Gualtieri 2001: 31). Syrian immigrants wanted to protect themselves from "the most vitriolic language of the day, which linked immigration to contagion and disease" (Gualtieri 2001: 32).

Philip M. Kayal, in "Religion and Assimilation: Catholic 'Syrians' in America" (1973: 409), states that "nearly ninety percent of all Arabic-speaking immigrants arriving here before 1924 were Syrian Christians from Mount Lebanon who were either Roman Catholics of Eastern rite or Syrian (Eastern) Orthodox. They were not 'Arabs' in the popular sense of the word". Thus, it makes sense that Kahlil's father considers himself American instead of Arab, although his rejection of Arabic is more difficult to understand. Kayal (1973: 418) argues that Syrian Americans who wanted to thrive in their adopted country lived "dual life styles" by keeping their ethnic "differences" to the privacy of family life. Clearly, Kahlil's father makes the choice to assimilate into American culture and keep the Syrian part of him private. Kahlil, at the age of fifty-three and after the attacks on September 11, must confront his father's choice because his Syrian ethnicity marks him as an "other". Although he may have thought of himself as a white man with a tenuous ancestral connection to the Middle East, other people see him as a dangerous "other", which is why the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal take matters into their own hands, abduct him, and brutally interrogate him to get him to admit that he is a terrorist. Kahlil's Situe witnesses his ordeal and helps him, not by showing him how to escape it but by telling him stories.

The ghost of Kahlil's Situe now considers Kahlil's ignorance of his family history and his ancestral language a mistake, and she blames herself. She admits to him that, when she was alive, she "was the sphinx on the porch. The silent woman who sat and smoked". Kahlil argues that she was "the center of the family" (Noble 2007: 244), but she does not want him to ignore what she now knows, which is that she could have done more to teach him his language and his history. Part of Kathleen Brogan's theory on the use of ghosts in American literature is the notion that ghosts "figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (Brogan 1998: 29), which is exactly what both Kahlil and his Situe must do. She must make up for her neglect; she must undo the past, the many years of silence when she was alive and could have taught him the family history. Kahlil must in turn recover what he never knew he had lost. He must listen to his grandmother's stories and learn something about himself. In most traditional ghost stories, the trauma happens in the past, but Kahlil's trauma happens in the present when so-called "patriots" target him for being a "terrorist". Kahlil cannot use his memories to reconstruct the present because he does not have many familial memories to help him reconstruct a past that he also never had, and this is the task that his grandmother returns to fulfill.

For Kahlil, seeing the ghost of his grandmother creates problems at home. His wife, Sophie, is less than supportive about his dream of an Arabic speaking eagle or his visiting grandmother. She has no sympathy for him when he complains that, since he woke up from the dream, he has not been able to "retrieve the eagle" or "dream of Situe", and he feels "like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders", a man approaching "despair" (Noble 2007: 4). Sophie does not care that he is missing his grandmother. Once, when he leaves the house to attend a meeting of the Hashanian Society at church, she tells him to "Try to act normal" (Noble 2007: 5) as if wishing he could see his grandmother again were somehow abnormal behavior for a man. Sophie does not think a man should discuss his grandmother, who has been dead for years, or speak about flying to heaven with an eagle. She has strict gender defined expectations about manly behavior, but Kahlil is distracted and childlike, missing his grandmother at the age of fifty-three. In fact, at the end of the novel, when Kahlil returns home after having been abducted and brutalized, Sophie uses his conversations with his dead grandmother and his dream about the eagle to paint him as a man with emotional problems. She asks the police officer, "did he tell you that a huge white eagle appeared to him in our bedroom and offered to take him to heaven to see" his grandmother? As if that were not disloyal enough, she also tells the officer about the "list of questions about the meaning of life, which he and Situe discussed after sneaking onto the porch of her old house in East Los Angeles" (Noble 2007: 258). Sophie uses Kahlil's magical relationship with his dead grandmother against him. She does not want to understand what Kahlil's connection to his grandmother and the past brings to him.

After she first comes to him in a dream, the ghost of Kahlil's grandmother appears for the first time at the Saints Peter and Paul Syrian Orthodox Church. As Kahlil is delivering a report on the last meeting's minutes for the Southern California chapter of the Hashanian Mutual Aid Society, he is "distracted by a movement in the back of the room" and sees that, "in the corner by the window sitting on her stool was Situe, smoking one of her beloved Duke cigarettes" (Noble 2007: 10). Instead of acting "normal", as his wife had told him to do, he exclaims, "Oh, my God, my God. You're back" and asks "Please, please, don't leave again until I have a chance to talk to you" (Noble 2007: 10) to the total bewilderment of the twelve remaining members of the society who were listening as he read the report. At this point, through the confusion, "Isaac Malouf, who had been a friend of Kali's father, asked Kali whether something was the matter", but Kahlil "didn't respond" (Noble 2007: 10); he finally realizes that the other men in the room cannot see his Situe, and they will probably be as reluctant to accept his visions as Sophie was reluctant to hear about his dream. When the men take a "smoking break" (Noble 2007: 10) and go outside, Kahlil is free to approach his grandmother. He tells her "I've been desperate to talk to you", as "he lifted the hand without the cigarette and kissed it gently and deferentially", but he also tells her "you'll get in trouble if you smoke in here. New rule". In a magical moment, Kahlil neither questions the appearance of his grandmother's ghost nor refrains from interjecting reality.

His Situe tells him, "Don't worry about the cigarettes, Kali. They're made in heaven. No ashes, no cough. And only you can see the smoke" (Noble 2007: 11). The result of this first vision is that Kahlil asks his grandmother about "the nature of the universe". He has already defined himself as "a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders" (Noble 2007: 4), so it is not surprising that he should ask such philosophical questions. His Situe tells him that he "should start with something more modest" and sends him home "to think more carefully about what [he] wanted to ask" (Noble 2007: 12).

Kahlil is so happy to speak to his Situe again that he forgets about Sophie's objections to his dream and tells her, "something wonderful happened tonight" (Noble 2007: 11). He innocently admits to her in bed that his "Situe came back". Sophie's response, however, is, "Oh my God, Kali, no. No more of this" as she "placed her arm over her face and moaned and turned away from her husband's voice" (Noble 2007: 12). Sophie is not willing to accept the magical moments that are now part of her husband's life, and she does not change her mind. At the end of the novel, Sophie tells Kahlil that "it's significant that you got your mind back when Situe went away. Or when you thought she went away" (Noble 2007: 267), which is not true, but Kahlil does not argue the point. After he returns home from having been brutalized by "patriots", he does not offer his wife any details about what happened to him, and he certainly does not tell her that his Situe's ghost helped him survive his ordeal. Sophie assumes that his reluctance to argue means that he agrees with her and demands that he acknowledge that "she didn't come back. She was never here" (Noble 2007: 267), but this is something that Kahlil cannot give her, even to keep the peace. Instead of answering his wife, he "turned his head aside—a gesture much used by Situe to avoid a situation or a feeling she didn't desire" because "it was too much to ask—this disavowal" (Noble 2007: 267). Kahlil cannot deny that his grandmother returns to guide him through a horrible episode of his life and to tell him a few stories that do in fact teach him something about his family and himself.

The first story told by Kahlil's grandmother is the story of her brother Bashara Ibrahim Bashara who steals his parents' "fortune", a few coins hidden in a pouch in a chest, to pay for his passage to America. The loss of the son and their small fortune destroys the family, and soon Tofa, the father, dies. Tasheeda, Bashara's mother, becomes bitter and eventually also dies, which leaves their daughter alone until the local priest arranges for her passage "to New York City, to work for a family from Beirut which had gone a generation before and had great success" (Noble 2007: 28). In the meantime, "Bashara became rich. Very rich. As he promised, he sent money back to his village. He paid for electricity. He built a new church. He erected a small medical clinic and paid city doctors to travel there once a month. Because of him, the people of the village had better lives", but Kahlil exclaims, "*But his fortune was based on a crime!*" (Noble 2007: 28). Kahlil's grandmother's very personal story teaches Kahlil the family history as it actually happened, which means that Kahlil now knows that his family history in America begins with a criminal act.

Bashara's story allows Kahlil's grandmother to tell her grandson that people often have to make hard choices. Those choices change their lives and the lives of others, sometimes for the better. Kahlil, however, is reluctant to listen. He finds Bashara's theft of his parents' treasure abhorrent, but his grandmother wants him to understand that even bad things can lead to something good. Kahlil's grandmother reminds him that, "*because of Bashara, your grandfather had the means to start the store*". This is the store that, she points out, "*supported all of us*" (Noble 2007: 29). Her argument with Kahlil is the result of his outrage at Bashara's crime. He sees only what Bashara did but not the good that came from his action. Kahlil points out that, because of Bashara, "*his mother and father died of broken hearts*", but his grandmother responds, "*They would have died anyway*". He reminds her that Bashara's "*sister endured the bitterness of her mother and worked like a slave*", but his grandmother counters that she "*would never have gotten to the New World if Bashara hadn't stolen the fortune*" (Noble 2007: 28). Kahlil finally satisfies his grandmother when he asks, "*Are you saying that nothing is clearly good or clearly bad? That there is no line between good and evil?*" to which she responds, "*It's more complicated than you think*". Kahlil, however, will not relent and admits, "*I still hold him in content*". His grandmother makes him feel a little better when she tells him that she "*saw him recently out of the corner of my eye roaming around with some of the others*" in heaven, and she "*vowed that I'd stab him in the heart with our father's dagger if I ever saw him again*", but she quickly adds, "*I didn't, of course*" (Noble 2007: 29).

The ghost of Kahlil's grandmother is not simply a storyteller. She tells the stories that make up history, in this case the history of a people who barely kept records. They are, as David Lowenthal (1997: 33) points out, "*individual life-histories [that] uniquely illumine historical sources and contexts*". Situe's stories have been passed down by word of mouth, and they are based on the lives of real people who sometimes did the wrong thing for a good reason. Lowenthal (1997: 35) also argues that these family stories, what he calls "*the domesticated past*" evident in "*legends of origin and endurance, of victory or victimization, project the present back, the past forward, aligning us with forebears whose virtues we share but whose vices we shun*". Situe wants her grandson to learn from these stories to be more flexible, even more forgiving, because she knows what he is about to suffer, but he complains that her stories paint his ancestors in a negative light. He is not exactly willing to listen to his grandmother's ghost, and he also complains that she is not answering his questions. When he asks her if he is "*going to die soon*", another one of the questions that she chooses not to answer, she explains, "*I'm not supposed to give you concrete information; I'm supposed to guide you gently, let you find your own way, draw your own conclusions, seek your own truth*". Then, she adds that part of her job is to "*answer a question with a question. And so forth*" (Noble 2007: 57), a humorous point that exasperates Kahlil but reveals her love for him.

Kahlil's grandmother knows that he is about to be abducted and beaten, so she tries to make him laugh. She appears as a benign, whimsical ghost who, throughout the novel, plays jokes on her grandson. She knows exactly what her

purpose is in her grandson's life, but she worries that she has a lot to teach him and he is "such a slow learner" (Noble 2007: 57). Although she appears to him often, even as the men who abduct him interrogate him, she worries that he is not learning. She asks herself if he could "comprehend in direct discussion the principles she was trying to teach him?" (Noble 2007: 104). The problem is that the principles that she is trying to teach him clash with the things he has learned during his life and sometimes provide confusing messages. She wants him to know "that the only thing certain is change itself; that tradition counts for everything; tradition counts for nothing; that individual courage and prowess matter; that community matters," but most importantly she wants him to realize "that the world is good, the world is bad, and so forth" (Noble 2007: 104-105). Kahlil's Situe has limited time to provide her grandson with the wisdom to survive his ordeal, to become more flexible, but she worries about his ability to understand what she is trying to tell him. Through her own doubts, she tells herself that "he was learning, whether he knew it or not. And she would return when he needed her, whether she could help or not" (Noble 2007: 105).

Situe's second story goes back in time, according to her, "*well over a thousand years ago*", which prompts Kahlil to argue, "with all due respect, dear grandmother, how do you know what happened then?" Her answer, in her customary good humor, is "primary sources, dear grandson. The horse's mouth" (Noble 2007: 44). This is a story about the time "*when our people lived in a small settlement along the edges of the desert, they climbed aboard their camels and rode off in huge numbers to raid the caravans*" but Kahlil interrupts again to argue that "our people lived in the mountains, not the desert" (Noble 2007: 44). Situe ignores him and continues by saying that "*the encounters were bloody; they were murderous*" because "*people cut off each other's heads. And hands. And certain other parts to make sure that their enemies did not proliferate*" (Noble 2007: 44). Again, Kahlil argues that his ancestors "couldn't have been involved in something like that" because "they believed in God" (Noble 2007: 45). Situe is challenging what little Kahlil knows about his family by telling him that some of his ancestors were murderers. If this is true, then his ancestors are responsible for what happens to Haleema, the girl who survives the massacre in Situe's story. According to Situe, after Haleema's caravan is attacked, "*Haleema was overlooked in the slaughter; somehow spared the raping and the death*" (Noble 2007: 45). However, when she hears moaning from the pile of dead bodies, she does not hesitate to help even after she realizes that the man moaning is "*one of the young men who had just murdered her tribe*". Instead of killing him, Haleema "*rose and found a jug of water*", and "*lifting the man's head, she trickled the water over his mouth until he was awake*" (Noble 2007: 46).

Kahlil displays the inflexibility that his grandmother dislikes so much when he instantly judges Haleema's behavior. First, he asks, "he helped kill her family and tribe and she helps him?" To which his grandmother answers, "such things do happen" (Noble 2007: 46). The lesson in this story is that people should be kind to one another and do what is right, not what is expedient or convenient, but Kahlil is not paying attention. He also places himself in a



strange position when he tells his grandmother that "if someone had killed everyone on my caravan, I wouldn't help them. I'd happily watch them die" (Noble 2007: 46). He has apparently forgotten that Haleema saves a murderer who is one of his ancestors, so Haleema is in fact doing him a favor. He also has just complained that his ancestors believed in God and would not have committed the crimes that his Situe says they had committed, but he objects to saving the life of a wounded man. In a sense, Situe's story challenges him to examine what he means when he claims that his people believed in God, which is a statement devoid of meaning until he actually knows that believing in God requires that Haleema help the wounded man, even if he is the enemy.

Haleema's story ends tragically because her people are just as intransigent as Kahlil is now. When the caravan does not arrive at its destination, her people send a search party; they find *"the lone survivor, and praised her extravagantly for her fortitude and toughness. She told them about the attack and the heroic, though futile, defense by her people. She did not tell them about the man"* (Noble 2007: 47). However, when she returns to her village and tells one of her cousins about the man whose life she saved, *"one of the elders"* calls her and asks her *"did you help the man who murdered your family?"* The elder, who should know better, demands to know, *"Did you feed him and nurse him back to health?"* Situe tells Kahlil, *"you can guess what happened to her"*. Kahlil, however, does not want to think about what happens to Haleema because he has also condemned her for doing what was ethical. Instead, he asks, *"what does it have to do with me?"* His Situe's answer is, *"You have the same options as everybody else, Kali"* (Noble 2007: 48). Kahlil's Situe does not want to tell him what he has to do, but she uses a story from his family history to teach him a lesson. She has already told him that her job is to guide him so that he can make the right choice. The option open to Kahlil is whether he is going to become a murderer by taking vengeance on his abductors or risk his life to save the lives of others. This is a choice that Kahlil will soon face as he makes his journey home.

When the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal abduct Kahlil, they take him to "the basement of an abandoned building" that is, according to Situe, who has been monitoring the situation from her cloak of invisibility, "about fifteen miles north" (Noble 2007: 91) of Santa Vista. Scared as he is, Kahlil tells his Situe that he is not sure what he can do if he escapes from that basement. Situe likes what he says and exclaims, "finally" because she hears in his statement "intelligent flexibility, a reasonable acknowledgment of the unknown" (Noble 2007: 92). When he asks, "Can't you just get me out of here? With some heavenly magic or something?" she tells him, "You know the rules", which of course means that she cannot use magic to get him out of his predicament, but what she does is give him once again a bit of wisdom. When Kahlil asks, "Who are these people?" she tells him that "the cast varies, but the script remains the same". Annoyed, he asks, "what kind of answer is that?" Her response is that "it's the same everywhere; only the uniforms change". He says, "They're not wearing uniforms", and she answers, "Exactly". When the men enter to continue the interrogation, she leaves with the final statement, "Now is

the time for bravery, dear Kali. And vision. You have the means. You have the ability" (Noble 2007: 92). Her last words to him work because, as the man in the brown suit leads Kahlil to another room, "Kali felt the proportion of fear to courage shifting slightly. More courage, less fear. He thought of Situe's words; her comforting image rested in a corner of his mind" (Noble 2007: 93). During the interrogation, Kahlil "looked at the faces of the two men and saw the failure of empathy, the corruption of unchecked power" (Noble 2007: 94). Slowly but surely, Kahlil is learning, and the presence of his grandmother's ghost helps him to bear the abuse perpetrated on him by men who hate him.

Situe's third story emphasizes the irrational in everyday life. At the end of the latest interrogation, Kahlil fights back. When his Situe sees him, his "nose was caked with dried blood. His face was swollen. His eyes were black". His Situe tells him, "although we are proud of you. We didn't know you had it in you", and she claims to be speaking for herself and "the colleagues I persuaded that you were worth the trouble" (Noble 2007: 98). Apparently, someone else in heaven is keeping an eye on what happens to Kahlil. He is in pain and not exactly receptive, but she tells him the story of two fountains in an unspecified village at an unspecified time. According to Situe, the women in the village complained that the fountain was too far and carrying water was too difficult. Soon, "*there was so much complaining that their husbands and fathers and sons could no longer tolerate it*", and "*rather than pitch in and help carry, which would have violated all the rules they lived by, they decided to dig another well in the other half of the village and build another fountain over it*" (Noble 2007: 100). Having two fountains in one village works well for a while, but soon the villagers realize that the village is separated and "the eligible daughters are cut off from half of the eligible sons" (Noble 2007: 100). Even after they dig a new well and build a new fountain, "*the talk was fountains, fountains, fountains*" (Noble 2007: 102). Into the dissatisfaction with the fountains walks the priest who was making "*his semiannual visit*" (Noble 2007: 102). He drinks first from the old fountain and then from the new one and praises the water from both; then "*he blessed the few marriages that had taken place in his absence, christened babies, dissolved curses with holy water, erased bad luck by his presence*" (Noble 2007: 102).

The visit goes well until "*on the last afternoon of the priest's visit*", the villagers hear the sound of horses bringing "*The Turks: coming to conscript their young men, to take them to die or starve or fade away from homesickness*". The young priest, "*holding a Byzantine cross in front of him as though he were casting out the devil*" (Noble 2007: 103) confronts the soldiers, and "*just as he reached the leader, a snake slithered out of its hole. One horse bucked and screeched, spooking the others, who also bucked and screeched, thereby igniting the riders, who cursed and drew their weapons, thinking they were being ambushed*" (Noble 2007: 103-104). The result is that "*the young priest—never an agile man—was struck in the chest by plunging hooves. He dropped to the ground and within seconds a fatal blow was delivered*"; this causes the entire village to attack the soldiers. Since "*there was no love lost between these groups. The soldiers, in self-righteous anger, sliced and shot*

*their unarmed attackers. Many villagers were killed*" (Noble 2007: 104). According to Situe, after the slaughter, when the surviving villagers argue and complain about what happened, they blame the second fountain. Their logic tells them that "*They'd ignored God's plan and substituted their own*" and "*built a second fountain when they had a perfectly good one already*" (Noble 2007: 104). By the time Situe finishes telling this story, Kahlil is asleep. She looks at "her dear grandson, wounded, braver than before" and asks herself "Would he prevail? Or merely survive?" (Noble 2007: 105). The story about the two fountains emphasizes the irrational. The priest, a good man, dies for no reason, just as Kahlil could easily die during the interrogations. Her story tries to teach him that the behavior of people does not always make sense.

By this point, the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal hand the investigation over to Orville and Shadrack, who introduce themselves to Kahlil as a thief and a rapist. Because of Orville's insistence that Kahlil should "relate everything in detail. From the beginning. Leaving out nothing. Starting with when Jane Plain brought in her three prescriptions and ordered four pairs of glasses" (Noble 2007: 133), Kahlil realizes that Orville and Shadrack have been planted in the cell to get information out of him. The men continue to insist that he should tell his story, but instead of answering their questions, Kahlil decides to say what he wants to say, not what they want to hear. He now knows that "his struggle to see and understand the collision of personal decision with the forces of history had shut him down" (Noble 2007: 138). In other words, he is being affected by recent events in American history, like the attacks on September 11, but he also realizes that his personal decision to chase Jane Plain to Santa Vista is part of the problem. When Orville asks him, "Do you embrace the Jihad?" he says, "my grandparents came here at the end of the nineteenth century". Kali's voice got louder. "My parents were born here. I was born here". This is not what Orville wants to hear, so he tells him that his story "fails to take into account the specifics of your heritage". Kahlil answers, "I don't divide the world into Arab and non-Arab or Muslim and non-Muslim. I don't think in those terms". Orville replies, "Then you're one of the few these days who doesn't" (Noble 2007: 141). Kahlil's abductors are not interested in the truth. They decide without evidence that Kahlil is a terrorist and take it upon themselves to punish him.

After he escapes from his abductors, Kahlil runs to a Laundromat near by, but the men pursue him. When he sees his tormentors approach, he hides in a dryer. His Situe appears to him in the dryer, but this time she is the one who asks a question. During the interrogation by the men who abduct him, instead of confessing to being a terrorist, Kahlil "confesses" that, when he was a child, his father had once picked him up at school, "and the next day the kids asked me if the colored man was my father". Kahlil, the child, was so ashamed to be different, that he "said no". He asks Orville, "Do you think he knew?" (Noble 2007: 144). As a grown man, Kahlil is ashamed of denying his father, and this is what he confesses. Situe, who hears the story, sneaks into the dryer and demands, "How could you be ashamed of your own father?" (Noble 2007: 156). His excuse is, "I was only a child", but she complains, "Then you should

have been a better child" (Noble 2007: 156). Since her return, this is the first time that she has scolded her grandson, but she relents because he is bloody, bruised, and scared. He asks her, "What shall I do now?" Her response is, "continue your journey" (Noble 2007: 157), which means that he still has to make his way home to his wife. She also answers his other questions with more questions, which upsets Kahlil enough to say, "I don't want any more of your stories" (Noble 2007: 157). Situe does not appear to be offended, but she also never tells him another story.

When Kahlil realizes that the men are gone, he starts running, but he worries that he cannot go to the authorities because he is now convinced that "the fire marshal and the man in the brown suit *were* the authorities" (Noble 2007: 161). He is so distraught that he questions his own right to exist, to move freely in a country he had until then considered his own. He tells himself that, "when he got home and had time to reflect, he'd have to rethink his mixture: how many parts Arab, how many parts husband; how many parts father; how many parts optician, church member, voter (not down party lines, usually). Man?" (Noble 2007: 243). By the end of the novel, Kahlil has been brutally forced to recognize that some part of him may be Arab, and he is now ready to embrace it. Throughout his ordeal and his subsequent journey home, Situe's stories provide him with a sense of who his ancestors were, not by cleaning up their stories but by telling him the truth about their lives. She tells him about the hard choices made by his people and helps him to recognize how the history of these people and their choices are still a part of him and ground him. This is important for Kahlil because, as Lisa Suhair Majaj explains, "family stories frequently ground ethnic identification, and the popularized search for 'roots' is often articulated as 'remembering who you are'" (Majaj 1996: 266).

Fortunately, although Kahlil is not overly concerned with his ethnicity, in his private life he participates in family gatherings and is a member of a Syrian Orthodox Church. He is part of a group of people who share their own ethnic foods. In fact, being able to eat Syrian food is so important to Kahlil that, when he gets to Santa Vista and takes a motel room, he looks through a phone book "hoping to locate an Arabic restaurant" (Noble 2007: 49). When he gets to the Palace of Fine Arts for the belly dancing contest, he is happy to find "traditional Lebanese *mezza: dolmas, tabbouleh, hummus*, olives, bread and cheese, and more, spread out below the stage" (Noble 2007: 74). Of course, this calls attention to his being an "other", for the man in the brown suit who has been following him since he left the airport is now standing beside him and asking, "Can you spell that for me?" as "he took a pencil and small notebook from his breast pocket" (Noble 2007: 74). The suspicious "Arab" word that Kahlil mentions is "hors d'oeuvres" (Noble 2007: 75), but this strange word reinforces his difference. He also knows the names of the dishes, and that positions him as an Arab, the kind of man whom the man in the brown suit and his cohorts consider dangerous. The fact that Kahlil does not speak Arabic and is an optometrist, instead of a terrorist, does not matter to these men.

As he values Middle Eastern foods, Kahlil also values belly dancing. He remembers belly dancing at weddings and other gatherings of his many relatives

and friends, so it is not surprising that, when he watches the belly dancers perform, he tells himself that the women on stage "didn't look like the dancers he remembered. These moved in fits and starts and, heavy or thin, looked angled and pointy and sharp". He may not have lived in Syria, but he does recognize the difference between an American belly dancer and a belly dancer "from the old country". He notes that, compared to the dancers on stage, "their teacher", who is the only Arab among them, "was from the old days. She did anything she wanted to up there" (Noble 2007: 54). Even though he has no memories of the "old days", Kahlil knows what a belly dancer should look like on stage. As Lisa Suhair Majaj points out, "memory plays a familiar role in the assertion of identity by members of ethnic and minority groups" (Majaj 1996: 266). Without realizing it, Kahlil asserts his Syrian identity when he recognizes the one authentic dancer on stage and when he chooses to eat the food of his people.

Like Kathleen Brogan, Stephen M. Hart (2003: 118) associates the appearance of ghosts with the "disembodied memorialisations of a trauma experienced by the subaltern, normally in the past". He argues that "the phantom in magical realist fiction is the projection within an ideologically riven nation of a subaltern forced to 'disappear' as a result of lying (in both senses of the term) on the wrong side of the political, gender, or race line" (Hart 2003: 115). While Kahlil is an "other", an American version of the "subaltern", he does not consider himself as different, and he does not seem to realize that his nation is "riven". When the man in the brown suit and the fire marshal abduct him, take him prisoner, and interrogate him, Kahlil tells them that he has "the right to express [his] opinion. The right to ask questions" because he is "a citizen. For God's sake, we're all citizens" (Noble 2007: 94). These men abduct him because, as his Situe points out to him, "They think you're a terrorist", and to prove it they use as evidence his "nationality, demeanor, activity" (Noble 2007: 89), but Kahlil refuses to believe it. She tells him, "You're an Arab", but his response is, "Even though I can't speak the language?" (Noble 2007: 89). The conversation between Kahlil and his Situe reveals the problem. Even after September 11, Kahlil cannot imagine that anyone would see him as an "other", a possible terrorist. He considers himself an American, not an Arab American. He does not seem to be aware that "in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, members of the Arab American community in the United States were exposed to new scrutiny, suffered new discrimination, and faced new uncertainty over their ability to fully enjoy a safe place within American society" (King Hainsworth 2006: 191).

At the beginning of his journey home, Kahlil is picked up by a rig whose driver, Benny, takes a Polaroid picture of everyone he picks up and hangs it on the dashboard. Benny tells him that the photograph is the cost of the ride. Kahlil does not think much of Benny's habit of taking pictures, but he admires the fact that there are many pictures hanging in the rig. Clearly, Benny has helped a lot of people, mostly Mexicans, judging by the pictures. When Benny tells him that he is carrying Mexicans in the back, Kahlil realizes that the Mexicans are illegal aliens and tells Benny, "I think I'd better get out. I have enough troubles as it is" (Noble 2007: 166). This is, however, one of those options that his Situe told him about. Although she is not appearing to him in the rig, Kahlil notices that his

Situe had "temporarily entered one of Benny's photographs from which she winked at him during their ride" (Noble 2007: 170). He is trying to decide whether he is going to get off the rig or continue his journey, but when the exit that he is supposed to take comes up, he stays in the rig. He chooses the journey. By chance, he also chooses one of his options because, when the rig stops and Kahlil goes to the back to meet the Mexicans, he immediately realizes that something is not right. There are "five men and a woman" (Noble 2007: 183) in the back, and Kahlil apologizes "for intruding, for alarming you", but he also apologizes because he has "nothing to offer you, nothing to give. Which is not my usual way. We Arabs", he says, calling himself an Arab for the first time, "are famous for our hospitality" (Noble 2007: 184). Because he has nothing to give them, he decides to tell them a story about "*a brother and three sisters [who] traveled across the sea from the old world to the new*" (Noble 2007: 185). Kahlil obviously makes the connection between the way his ancestors traveled to America and the way these Mexicans are making the journey, but his story is not well received. Mario, the coyote who is traveling with the Mexicans, objects. Kahlil tells him that he is "trying to comfort", but Mario asks, "With a fairy tale?" (Noble 2007: 185).

Kahlil dislikes Mario instinctively, and he dislikes him even more when he hears Mario's story about being framed for killing a man whose body was never found simply because he "had an affair with another man's wife". Kahlil listens to Mario's story, but "he did not like this man. He did not trust him, He was wary of tricks and lies. At bottom, he disapproved of infidelity, including his own" (Noble 2007: 187). When he sees how Mario "leaned over the woman, took her arm and pulled her up", Kahlil realizes that something is not right. He asks, "What are you doing?" but Mario tells him to "stay out of the way" as he "led the woman through the door and into the passage-way. She did not resist; she did not acquiesce" (Noble 2007: 188). Kahlil jumps out of the rig to get help from the guard at the Galaxy Casino where the rig is parked, but the man mocks him because of the bruises on his face and body. When Benny returns to the rig, he tries to tell him that Mario "mistreats those people", but Benny is drunk and does not listen. His Situe then appears on "top of a cement truck, over the huge dome where the cement was mixed" and Kahlil tells her, "I need to save them" (Noble 2007: 195). Instead of acting concerned about what he is doing, Situe says, "Tell me instead about your story" (Noble 2007: 195), and it pleases him that she had heard his attempt to tell a story. He is however plotting to defeat Mario, so Situe once again helps him by informing him that "the immigration authorities are at the edge of the parking lot" (Noble 2007: 196). Instead of attacking Mario, Kahlil decides to scare him into leaving. He takes the option of convincing him that his life is in danger instead of using a weapon against him, and his ploy works because "Mario jumped from the truck, strode across the parking lot, entered the casino, and effortlessly disappeared into the crowds" (Noble 2007: 199). The illegal aliens in the truck are free to go, and Mario loses the money that he would have made when he delivered these people to their destination.

After the rig leaves the parking lot, Kahlil stays behind and continues his journey on foot. He saves the illegal aliens from being sold by Mario, so he stops to admire the windmills whose "soft, spinning song called to him" (Noble 2007: 201). This is when he finds his grandmother worried that the people who are trying to enter heaven "feel entitled; they argue with everything we say", for they have "no humility, no insight" (Noble 2007: 204). Kahlil once again attempts to engage his grandmother in a philosophical discussion by asking her who actually gets into heaven. When he asks, "what about Hitler? Could he have gone to heaven?" she tells him that "Somebody always asks about him. Him and Attila the Hun and various serial killers". Still, she "can't provide information about specific people", but what she does tell him is that "what the questioner is really asking is whether redemption is available to the worst person on earth. Whether being sorry at the end can erase what a person has done before" (Noble 2007: 208). This is one of the most important tenets of Kahlil's religion, but his *Situe* does not provide him with an answer.

During his conversation with *Situe*, while he is trying to comfort her about the demands of her new job, Kahlil encounters Max, who shoots at a rattlesnake that Kahlil had not noticed. Max claims to be a Vietnam veteran who is living off the grid, but he is simply a man too damaged to live anywhere else. Kahlil likes Max and is surprised by "this unexpected harmonious meeting of apparently dissimilar human spirits" (Noble 2007: 216). Max in turn helps him by shooting the rattlesnake, feeding him, and taking him to an abandoned power plant where Kahlil can take a bath. Max never asks what happened to him, either because he does not care or because he does not think it is his business. He simply accepts Kahlil and helps him. They get along so well that Kahlil tells Max, "I come from a long line of storytellers" (Noble 2007: 229) and tells him the story of his grandfather Mansour, "his two younger brothers and younger sister" who "planned to live in Syria Town", in Boston, "with their mother and her new husband, and the four stepbrothers they had never met. Mansour had been his mother's favorite in the old country. And now he was an orphan", Max asks. "Thought his mother was alive" (Noble 2007: 230), but this is something that no one in Kahlil's family had ever stated, so Kahlil gives him the same answer that he was given as a child, "There is more than one way to be an orphan" (Noble 2007: 230).

For the first time in his life, Kahlil questions the family story and the reason why members of his family turned their backs on Mansour's mother. When the four children from her first marriage arrive in Boston, her new husband puts the three boys to work as peddlers. The boys hate their stepfather for making them work, but work allows them to make enough money to buy a car and leave Boston for California. The three boys obviously blame their mother for her new husband's behavior, so they leave her behind in Boston, and no one in the family ever mentions her. Kahlil now tells Max that Mansour's story "became a family legend of Arab success and independence", but he now realizes that "there was no room in it for my great grandmother". As he tells Max this story, Kahlil realizes that he "never asked how my grandfather could be an orphan at the same time he had a mother who outlived

him" (Noble 2007: 234). Clearly, his Situe's stories have taught Kahlil to question everything, including his family's stories.

Through the rest of his journey, Situe appears to Kahlil many times, but not as she had before. She plays tricks on him by showing her face in unusual places. Kahlil sees his "Situe's head—disembodied, like a Cheshire cat, a mischievous smile on her face—in the shade of a gray-green shrub" (Noble 2007: 228). When he hops a train to finally go home, he sees her face on billboards, "one of Situe selling coffee, one of Situe urging citizens to vote, another of Situe exhorting passengers to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ". Kahlil tells himself that his grandmother has an "apparent inability to resist playing jokes". He sees "the stoic, silent grandmother of his childhood transformed" because "she had a much better sense of humor dead than she'd had when alive" (Noble 2007: 242). His Situe appears to him in the railroad car "on the sandbag facing Kali" (Noble 2007: 243), and she returns to complain to him that he had told Max about "your poor drunken grandmother, passed out on the floor". She adds that hearing him tell this story about the last few days of her life "was humiliating" because he "revealed secrets. Leaving me no privacy, no pride". Her point is that she wants "to be remembered with dignity" because she feels that she "accomplished very little" (Noble 2007: 244) during her lifetime.

Situe's final visit with Kahlil takes place after he has a heart attack. Through the pain, he sees his "Situe who, ahead of him, had turned around and waited with outstretched hand. At this time, instead of the plump hand of a small boy, the hand of a man, albeit imperfect, accepted her welcome". However, when he attempts to walk beside her, she tells him to "pull yourself together". He asks if she has "bad news?" for him, and she tells him, "There's news. It's neither good nor bad" (Noble 2007: 272). At the end of the novel, Situe is still joking with her grandson, but she tells him that there was "a mistake in the timing. Sometimes our clocks are off. What can I say?" (Noble 2007: 273), and this is not his time to leave. At this point, Kahlil "looked behind him on the path and saw that it was full of possibilities and sorrow". His grandmother looks at him "with what could only be called infinite love" and tells him, "It's a cruel world, Kali. Enjoy" (Noble 2007: 273). Kahlil's grandmother, his Situe, returns from the dead to guide him through a horrible experience. In the process, she also provides him with stories about his family history that give him a better sense of who he is as a Syrian in America. The stories that she tells him represent the history of his people, the good and the bad of many lives for whom survival often meant making difficult choices. Kahlil learns from his Situe that stories are important and that they must be told.

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