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Dinner in America: An Exploration of Theater Culture and Representation

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Dinner in America
An Exploration of Theater Culture and Representation

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by

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*To my family,
May your horizons forever broaden.*

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Introduction

I started this project to explore the lives of everyday people. It was a challenge to myself to see how interesting I could make the unspectacular interesting enough to hold the attention of others. I was curious to see if anyone would care about middle class people having dinner, especially if the dinner did not end in catastrophe. We cannot remember everyday; we cannot remember every meal that we have, every conversation that we have, and every experience that informs who we are today. But we can, and I believe it is essential that we do, take moments to think critically about the moment that we live in. I realized that as much as *Dinner in America* is about the family and the individual it is about the larger constructions and discourses that create their identities and beliefs.

As I began to work on *Dinner in America* beyond the story of the script I realized that it could be produced in a way that added to the conversation that the story was already engaging in. *Dinner in America* speaks not only to issues of representation in media, but the actual institutions of theater and art. Not only are there not enough characters of color in theater and art in general, but there are not enough people of color seeing art let alone participating in its creation. Theater more often than not comes off as elitist and exclusive. I did not want to participate in a theater that did not have a place for me on the stage, in the story, or in the audience. So I decided to create a space for myself and people like me in all three. My approach was not to try and directly confront or dismantle the ideas and structures that I had issues with, but instead to introduce another option. By creating space for what institutions and ideologies do not -- diversity, inclusivity, representation, and dialogue -- my hope for *Dinner in America* is that helps others reevaluate institutions we participate in and prompt more conversation about the world and people around us.

Who is Seeing Theater?

Growing up in New York City, theater seemed ubiquitous to me. Everytime I went into Manhattan and would see ad after ad, theater after theater; although it wasn't until my sophomore year in high school that I became a part of the theater making community, theater seemed like something anyone could go see with ease. I figured that with so many theaters in one place it would only be natural that even if it was only a few people making it, at least everyone was seeing it. But I realized that I wasn't seeing it. I realized that up until it was mandatory for me to see theater in school, I had seen barely any theater, performance, or any art for that matter. My parents had taken me to see *The Lion King* on Broadway, because "that's what you're supposed to do as *good* parents." I fell asleep halfway through "Hakuna Matata." But other than that instance of "good" parenting, art did not fit into the schedule of my middle class family. And even if we did have the time, we did not have the budget. As I grew older and had more freedom to explore the urban landscape on my own and exposed myself to more art I took a step back and instead of looking at the art I looked at who was looking. They may have looked like me, but what led them to that point where we met and what would happen after they left would be very different from me.

"Did you see that?" An older man asked me this about Sarah Michelson's *September 2017* ^Λ, which was performed at the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College. I was working as a ticket agent for one her shows. I answered the man that I had indeed seen it. "Well you shouldn't have!" He stormed off only about twenty minutes into the show. He did not ask for a refund, he did not say why, but I agreed with him. And I knew a refund would not make it better. "What followed was an hour of cacophony, screaming, and acting out as Michelson channeled her inner artfucker and waited to see who fell for it." Having experienced the show

first hand I cannot find better words to describe Michelson's performance (Witchel's review is actually of Michelson's "closely related piece" *October 2017* [^]). The pieces were very similar, with the differences being dependent on the location of the performances). I left angry and baffled as to how four years of residency, how four years of working on a single piece culminated to literal "cacophony." Of course it was not nonsense and there was a rhyme and reason to what I understood to be total chaos. The screaming, whitstiling, phone alarms, non-sequiturs, gibberish, and the repetitiveness of it all was informed by a larger, established, and respected discourse and practice. The New York Times illuminated this for me: "Ms. Michelson's work has often made reference to titans of modern dance... She said that in working with students, she had been thinking about legacies and their transmissions..." *September 2017* [^] was also full of reference and gestures from Michelson's own work, including *Devotion* and *4*. But what use is theater, dance, or any art for that matter if it is cryptic? I questioned the function of art that is calling on a culture only accessible to few but open and marketed to many. There had to be something wrong not because I felt it but because I saw it.

The audience members who were sitting next to me during the performance that I attended were more interested in their phones than what was happening on the stage. I saw at least ten people leave in the middle of the show. Michelson even waved to one of them on their way out the door, ironically, as she read her recurring line, "Professionalism goodbye. Kiss my ass." Whether it was tragic (or comedic) coincidence or a deliberate disregard, that moment, combined with the exclamation of "Well you shouldn't have!" forced me to not only reevaluate the kind of art I wish to support but the art that I wish to make. I was filled with fear that one day I would inhabit a practice that could only function properly for few, and old men would be saying, "Don't see that!" about *my* work. Or even worse, I would be a regular patron to art that

made me physically uncomfortable, and not for the purpose of transformative strife but simply because it was made complete disregard for my experience.

Not all art needs to be accessible to everyone or impact anyone in a certain way. Not all art needs to have ramifications in political, social, and ethical discourses. There is a difference between experiencing a performance that you did not understand because the subject matter was unfamiliar to you and a work that is crafted solely around an exclusive practice and group of people; a work that is deliberately alienating is art that I cannot get behind. I'm not placing *September 2017* on any kind of scale, or placing any value on it, firstly because Michelson knows what she is doing, and more importantly no one piece of art is worth more in any kind of way over another piece of art.

As much as want to support art in all of its forms and realize the importance for supporting the arts, this glaring problem of exclusivity could not go undiscussed for me. I know that art is worth the time and investment, but that is only because I have had the privilege of being able to participate in it. But not everyone has that luxury, and it should not even be a luxury. Theater and art has become inaccessible to those who need it most. Why would anyone be invested in cryptic modes and codes? Why would anyone spend money on "falling for" something? The theater has become almost sublime in that it increasingly houses intangible subjects. My goal is to find the answer to the question of how we get more people to participate in theater.

Who I Want to See in Theaters

As I began to actively look for more theater that was not only more accessible to me but to other people who do not regularly go to theater because of its exclusivity and elitist tendency, I soon realized that this was not hard to find. But the issue still remained: I was actively looking for it, and if I did not have the privileges of time and the resources to do so, I most likely would not have encountered it. I soon found myself with Antonin Artaud. His essay “No More Masterpieces” calls for the abolition of what Artaud considers the “masterpiece.” Narratives like *Oedipus Rex* and works by Shakespeare which have made “[the masses] accustomed to purely descriptive narrative theater, narrating psychology.” And he is correct that commercial theater sees more value in *The Lion King*, *Mary Poppins*, and the like, but anything in La Mama, Ars Nova, or a community theater could very easily go unnoticed by people not personally invested in theater. However, I do not believe that the narratives that he found problematic, the public’s “masterpieces,” have no place in the world of theater and art. What is more understandable is what they had become for him, and what they still are for many, is repetitious and bland for the sake of preservation. Preservation in the sense that productions of Shakespeare, *after* Shakespeare become mostly if not completely reliant on the text.

The spirit and humanity of the “masterpiece’s” narrative is lost to time and a change in sentiment. Although a bit outdated, I still completely understood Artaud when he argued:

The public, which mistakes the bogus for truth, has the sense of what is true and always reacts to it when it appears. Today, however, we must look for it in the street, not on the stage. And if the crowds in the street were given a chance to show their dignity as human beings, they would also do so.

The idea of looking for “truth” in the streets instead of the stage, does not argue that truth cannot exist on the stage, but that the attempt to exclusively create truth on stage or in a theater

you will either fall short or create bogus that people will take as truth. There is value in the “masterpiece,” or at the very least the spirit of the “masterpiece,” which may lose its truth over time. We can either depart from the “masterpiece” altogether or just the methods of its production. My interests were not in redefining or rejuvenating the “masterpiece.” Instead, I looked to the streets. I looked to the streets for the truth, but more importantly, for humanity.

I wrote *Dinner in America* as a project to invoke humanity. To invoke the truth and humanity of my own experiences and the lives and experiences of others. This is a project in empathy and solidarity, in exploring the other that I agree with, am against, and the other that I sympathize for. It is an effort to make theater more inviting, accessible, and inhabited with truth instead of its doppelganger. My goal was to allow the “crowds in the street” to show their “dignity.” I wanted to give space and time for the dignity of peoples whose dignity, time, and truth are denied both on stage and in the streets: Latinos and Arabs. When these two groups are represented through any medium, their dignity is absent and replaced with caricatures and handpicked traits that do not allow characters to be truthful and fully inhabited. I am not interested in dismantling the existence of harmful racial caricatures and stereotypes. Instead, I wanted to create organic diversity that allows for difficulty and dialogue, rather than creating a spectacle of otherness through stereotypes and caricatures.

These harmful representations of the Latino and Arab identities have deep roots in academic, cultural, and economic history. It stems from the desire for control; the desire of European (and later American) powers to have control and influence over the “other.” This manifests itself most directly through colonialism and occupation. By the end of the twentieth century, however, we see the near extinction of direct colonial control of one nation over

another. This does not signify the end of occupation and control, since it does not take long for one to find evidence of orientalism.

Orientalism refers primarily to the relationship between the West (Europe and America) and the Near East (Middle East) but can encompass the wider region of the “Orient” (the Middle East and Asia), and its tactics are recognizable in other power/influence relationships between other states, i.e. the United States and Latin America. Edward Said describes orientalism as “a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts... it not only creates but maintains... it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an even exchange with various kinds of power.”

One of the various kinds of power that Said discusses, one that is most available, easy to control, and most dangerous, easy to digest, is representation.

In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel: these are some traditional Arab roles in the cinema.

Over thirty years later and these words are still unfortunately true. How is anyone supposed to differentiate fact from fiction, life from film, when all they have access to are these representations? It is all the more nefarious when these “traditional Arab roles” are supported and maintained by centuries of “aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts” in addition to today’s ongoing and reductive media and political rhetoric on Arabs and the region. Arabs and their allies cannot exist as neutral forces in the world; if not an obstacle, usually to resources, they are seen as a threat to the Western values of democracy, freedom, and religion.

It may seem that the simple solution is to point out the lies in representation. But it is difficult to debunk a seven hundred year old lie. Revealing the apparatus and components of orientalism is not enough to repair the damage that has been done. *Dinner in America* does not carry a sign that says “Arabs and Latinos are not bad.” This story exists within the structures of orientalism and its characters are participants in it. Some do not see the lie, some are victims of the lie, and others try to remedy it. My hope for *Dinner in America* is that it dilutes the dense misrepresentations of entire peoples and regions; that it challenges the lie, not only by calling it out, but by creating space where the Arab and Latino is neither the adversary nor the hero. It rests on the assumption that everyone in the room is worth listening to, being with, and most importantly, worthy of telling their own story.

By creating a story that gives humanity back to those that it has been taken from, I hope to draw a more diverse crowd. By making space for diversity on the stage, there is space made for it in the audience. It is illuminating for some when they see a non-white character who breaks the tropes and stereotypes we have become desensitized to; it is refreshing for the non-white viewer to see pieces of themselves in characters who do not exist to propagate “traditional roles” but, instead, simply as a recognition of their existence in this diverse world. *Dinner in America* invites everyone to learn, to experience life, and to move forward with a more critical eye.

An Invitation

Dinner in America is a play written for the stage. I had written it with the intention to have it staged in a theater, with a naturalistic set design. In my goal to make theater more accessible and comfortable for an audience, I began to worry that the piece would be too pedestrian to hold the interest of enough people. I struggled to decide whether my investment was to make the physical space of the theater and the actual act of going to theater more enticing and accessible, or art itself more palatable and desirable. I realized that my script alone was not enough to communicate that theater and art in general should be less exclusive and elite. This question came into mind because I realized how difficult it is to separate the physical institution of theater and the art which is housed in it. When audience members walked out on Sarah Michelson's performance they were not just leaving the art piece, they were leaving the Fisher Center. Although I was (and still am) concerned with making theater going more accessible and inviting to a more diverse crowd, I decided I want to focus on the art itself. I want to challenge the idea that art, theater, performance, etc. can only exist in places where they are "meant" to be. Art can truly happen anywhere, and should not be valued by its location, creator, or content. I wanted not only the dignity and truth of the people we encounter everyday to be revealed through my script, but for the dignity and truth of theater and performance to be rediscovered through its production. I realized that *Dinner in America* would be best utilized as a site specific piece. Although the script is created for the stage, it is best utilized in an actual home.

The act of inviting people, especially strangers into your home requires vulnerability and trust. But as the recipient of that invitation you are much less intimidated by the visage of an actual theater. A dinner invitation, is much more personal than a theater ticket; being a guest in someone's house is more intimate than being a patron at a theater. That being said, *Dinner in*

America still exists as a piece of art; my intention was to create a space and situation that could be recognized as a theatrical event, but allowed for the comfort and accessibility that is lacking in many theater experiences. The intention of staging this in my house was not to trick anyone, but to express my trust in those who wanted to come see it and my belief that people really do want to experience more art but not its institutions. The goal was to equalize art and public, because they should not be separated. Art is about the public, and therefore should be able to take place in it, for it, and come from it. My invitation was not to come to a theater to see a play that was going to tell you something; instead, it was an invitation to be in a space with people and ideas that we may not encounter everyday.

Dinner in America, as it was staged, blurs the line between the audience and the performance. The hope was that by being in a house, on a couch, in a real living room, looking into a dining room would create an intimacy for those watching. I wanted to leave very little to the imagination, allowing the audience to be present with the characters, what they had to say, and what they believe. By taking the responsibility away from the audience to actively try to believe that they are in a house, they have more time and energy to try and believe that my characters are real and important and worth being in a room with. Simultaneously, by being in the room with a group of people who have been invited to do the same, they are reminded that they are not alone and that they are there for a reason. I was not trying to create an atmosphere where the audience felt as they were watching events that should not be watched. It is not an invitation to “peek into” the lives these families, but that you are invited and welcomed to join these families for an event that will be difficult for everyone present.

Dinner in America is an invitation to just that, a dinner in America. In a moment in our history when difference for so many people has become volatile and undesirable, now more than

ever do we need to take more moments to appreciate difference in all of its forms. One thing that every culture, and every individual has in common is that they must eat. We can all agree that food is necessary and that enjoying food is preferable. One way to enjoy food is with others, but what happens when we meet on this common ground with people we do not have things in common with? With people we may even believe we are against or are against us? *Dinner in America* shows a possibility, not a prescription, of what could happen. It is indeed hopeful but even in this hopeful world where difference coexists without catastrophe, there is discomfort, struggle, and shortcoming. *Dinner in America* is an invitation to exist with difference, and understand that it will be difficult, and to give a time and space to think about how to better exist with it.

Living, Breathing People

Although there is a place for spectacle in theater and performance, I do not believe that theater and performance must revolve around it. The complexity of each individual person's life is a spectacle in itself. It seems increasingly common that we overlook individuals as human beings with stories and experiences as complex and numerous as our own. This is understandable, as we do not have time to take a few moments and truly understand each person for who they are and where they came from. Most of our interactions with people are either incidental or serve a different purpose than to understand them as people. Our coworkers and classmates only really exist in our minds as coworkers and classmates, because that is the main purpose of your interaction. What we choose to be known for is how the world sees us. Your doctor became a doctor so they can administer a service that you need. You may never fully understand why their coat is wrinkled or why their shoes are scuffed. We do not have the time to ponder such questions and get to know everyone as intimately as we know ourselves.

Dinner in America asks us to suspend time, and understand that the people we see on stage are fully inhabited by experiences that most of us have gone through, if not, know someone who has. The Nuñezes and Al-Nurs are the way they are because the lives that they have experienced up until the point where we meet them has informed all of the actions and words that we see and hear. We cannot like everyone, and everyone will not like us. In this story there is no winning or losing side, there is not wrong or right. These are people in a space. Just as we are outside of theater, in the real world and even by ourselves. Everyone in this story does not exist exclusively in this moment and everything that they say in front of the audience is not the only thing that represents who they are as people. These characters do not represent ideas or agendas. They do not have a message for you to take and give to others. The story is an

invitation to believe and rationalize everyone's ideas, even if for a moment before realizing that you disagree. These characters are indeed created, but similar to the way that we create ourselves.

Caricatures illuminate certain characteristics that are more apparently embodied by certain people, or groups of people. The Al-Nurs and Nuñezes were not created to illuminate the characteristics or behaviours we may find familiar as we watch them. Instead, they fully inhabit their traits, unaware of their own complexities and the individualities of others, just as we operate in the world. They actually believe what they say, and believe it of their own free will. The spectacle is not the tension that forms as the meal progresses, but instead, that tension is a vehicle to illuminate the spectacle of human nature and interaction.

Hansel and Raheela

It is not hard to see that the youths of this story have broken away from the limited scopes that their parents have inhabited. The largest gesture of this departure is the existence of their relationship in the first place. More of an acceptance of a different mode of living in the world than an active refusal of their parent's politics and ethics, Raheela and Hansel's relationship, nonetheless, upsets a certain ontology that their parents have found comfort in. As forward thinking and good intentioned as they are, their objective for acceptance and understanding is enacted through almost counterproductive and counterintuitive means. In an effort to have the dinner go well both Raheela and Hansel give their parents instructions on what *not* to do when meeting the other family.

Although the instructions for each respective family is different and tailored to who they are, the goal of the young couple is feigned homogeneity for the sake of safety and comfort. They tell their parents to be less of themselves than they usually are. Raheela and Hansel are

aware that their parents are not from completely different worlds and may even find common ground on certain things like family and hospitality. Being raised by them, the couple anticipates the problem that could arise when their parent meet for the first time and that may even persist as the relationship moves forward. This is a selfish project, and one that may be all too familiar. The cliché of the parent embarrassing you on the school trip or out in public has been taken to a whole new level. Political, ethical, and social conversations are potential for disaster in the eyes of Raheela and Hansel. Raheela knows about 'Abbas just as Hansel knows about Wendy that the slightest disagreement could spark difficult confrontation and conversation. So their remedy is to silence them.

What Hansel and Raheela do not realize is that this is not helpful. In an effort for their own comfort and wants, they have alienated their parents. They do not realize that they have invalidated their opinions and demonstrated to them that their wants, needs, and comfort are irrelevant. For two people who work towards closing the gap between peoples and elevate the disenfranchised, Hansel and Raheela cannot apply what they learned from their work to their family. In their eyes, their parents are objectively wrong and the only way to correct them is to attempt to deny their agency. This may come from fear of the unknown, a condition that also plagues their parents. They know how to handle their parents within their own families, but they expect a total loss of control if something were to arise between their parents.

Perhaps this is some form of projection. Both the Al-Nurs and Nuñezes make disparaging remarks about who their children have come to be. Of course they are proud of their children and love them; but Hansel and Raheela's departure from what their parents had hoped they would become would strike a certain chord of disappointment in any parent. Hansel and Raheela did not follow their paths out of active rejection or spite of their parents and what they stand for. They

truly believe what they stand for and what they work for just as much as their parents. But just as their parents believe that many of the things that their children is not the “correct” way, Hansel and Raheela believe the same about their parents. The control that they try to hold over their parents may be a learned tactic. They truly believe that if they can just get through the meal without touching on any of the things that make the families different (which of course there are many) everything will be okay and everyone will be happy.

Hansel and Raheela see themselves as champions of humanitarianism and liberal political thought when they are with their parents. They see themselves as pushing the boundaries in the right direction, a skill that they most likely did not learn from their parents. Their relationship in itself is a display of inclusivity and open-mindedness, both traits they believe that none of their parents have. The parents explicitly display their rigidity which, for their children, is an “incorrect” view; they fail to realize, however, their own rigidity when interacting with their parents.

Wendy and Peter

The Nuñezes are first generation Latino-American, who are living the American Dream. They work nine to five jobs, own a home, own cars, live in the quaint suburbs of a metropolitan area and sent their child to college. They achieved what their parents could not because of their parents’ struggle and hard work. Raised on Catholic ideology and morals, the Nuñezes operate on a system of living that is dependent on work that supports the family. In many Catholic households, especially Latino ones, the family is central and the maintenance of it is even considered a measure of success. Their preoccupation with Hansel being so far away, for so long stems from a fear of the deterioration of the family, ergo, of failure. Of course they want the best for their son and recognize that he is successful in what he sets out to do, but through his leaving

the family and not starting his own is disruptive to their beliefs. They truly do not understand why their son has left, and what he is doing, and their expression of disapproval and lack of support comes as a defense mechanism against what they perceive as an attack against their beliefs and lifestyle and a fear of failure.

Although I do not give detailed character descriptions of the Nuñezes (or the Al-Nurs) I envisioned them as white passing. As a white passing Latino, I have been reminded more of my privileges than my disadvantages throughout my life. People are often shocked when they find out both sets of my grandparents emigrated from the Dominican Republic. Others even sometimes refuse to believe me, saying that I “have to be Italian!” I picture the Nuñezes having similar experiences throughout their lives, and as it happened more frequently and when it happened later in their life they began to believe and accept it. They realized that their white passing meant access to more things that they would not be able to enjoy if they presented as Latino. The reason people often refuse to believe that white passing and even black Latinos are not Latino is because they do not fit “traditional roles.”

Just as the Arab has been prescribed a certain lifestyle and identity: Latinos are loud, they resemble indigenous peoples of South America, their families are large, they eat spicy foods, rice, and beans. The Mexican is most recognizable as a day laborer or farmer, they must wear ponchos and sandals. The Latino is dirty and lazy, yet simultaneously works long late hours cleaning other people’s bathrooms. This is the undesirable identity that the Nuñezes did not want to associate with or want to be associated with. The Nuñezes are Latino, but they are not those Latinos -- the Latinos that you do not want moving into your neighborhood or hanging out on your street corner. Most importantly, they are not the Latinos sneaking over the border. Their parents emigrated and raised them “the right way.” What Peter means is, his parents did not fit

the traditional role of how Latinos are expected to behave. He recognizes this is an issue, but instead of defending the Latino identity he defends his own actions. It is easier for him and Wendy to personally detach themselves from the issue rather than trying to fix it. They believe the tropes and stereotypes even though they are victims of it. They have assimilated not only to a culture but to an ideology, and ideology that alienates and misrepresents who they are and are simultaneously perpetrators of it. They do not see the contradiction because they are living in it, they do not see it because it would mean that they would subject to it. So instead, they defend their own Latino experience and identity, treating it as an anomaly, rather than arguing against the lies perpetuated by misrepresentation.

Just as the Nuñezes have become participants in the subjugation of Latino identity, they inhabit orientalism as it has manifested in the United States today. Since (and even before) George Bush's "War on Terror" began, the Arab has been one of the largest threats to American democracy and freedom. The Arab was no longer just a threat in his own region and to Jews in Israel, but a threat everywhere. The Arab is a terrorist because the news says that they are. The Arab has no place in America or Europe because our politicians say they do not. The Arab is exotic and will never shed her *hijab* and his *kufiya* because they will never accept the freedom of democracy. "Don't they speak English? That's good... ..Can't they not eat pork? ...We shoulda put a metal detector..." are not remarks that come from hatred. They come from the acceptance of the structures created by orientalist discourse. Once again, where there should be solidarity there is a refusal to recognize the common enemy: the architects of power and influence. They believe that Arabs are a threat because they have been taught it through representations in media, political discourse, economics, and academics. By the end of the dinner the Nuñezes may have

accepted the Al-Nurs but only as they exist as individuals. Just as they are not those Latinos they do not see the Al-Nurs as those Arabs.

Selma and 'Abbas

Selma and 'Abbas Al-Nur are products of twentieth century Arab identity and state building. This turbulent stage in the region's history informs the geography, politics, economics, and identity of the region. The ages of this Arab couple is essential to understanding why they believe what they do and how they operate in their world and in this story. Following the end of World War I in 1918, the Ottoman Empire, which once unified peoples from the Northern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and across Anatolia under one imperial power, had its borders reduced to only some of Anatolia and even that was only under European rule. This left everything that once fell under the rule of the Ottoman Empire to the rule of European imperial/colonial powers. Prior to 1918, although there was recognition of the ethnic identities of Syrian, Palestinian, Egyptian, Iraqi, etc. they were all unified under an Ottoman identity. With the Ottoman identity effectively being lost to the war, these populations now had to grapple with who they were and who they wanted to be. The new European created and controlled “nations” of Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen “each claimed that the Ottoman Empire had been a little better than an imperial prison that kept their nations in captivity.”

No longer having their Ottoman identity to support them, Arabs had to create their own. This manifested itself through nationalisms; some political activists decided to use their new borders to their advantage and create identities centered around the state, ethnicity and shared histories. A sentiment that complicated Arab nationalism was pan-Arabism, which “stresses the unity of all Arabs and, in its political form calls for the obliteration of national boundaries separating them.” These two modes of political thought dictated and guided the creation of what

the Middle East is today; leading to events like the military coup of 1949 in Syria, the Free Officers' coup of Egypt in 1952, which created the independent states of Egypt and Syria, respectively. Simultaneously, pan-Arabism allows for the creation of the United Arab Republic, the unification of Syria and Egypt going into the 1960's.

These events and sentiments make a singular Arab identity or mode of existing difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Selma and 'Abbas have roots in different nations, and have been exposed to different types of occupation from different entities. Selma, a Palestinian, has experienced the direct occupation of Israel on land that she had been told was rightfully hers. Although Selma does not fall neatly into the role of nationalist or pan-Arabist, she leans more towards an identity based in nationhood, or at the very least a history in the land. Her assertion of everyone having their "own stories" stems from the sentiment that Arabs can be separated into different nations who have their own histories and cultures that can be identified based on national borders rather than a unified Arab identity. 'Abbas' argument, "we are all Arab. Yet we all want to stake a claim in dirt, and that's the problem," invokes pan-Arabism. 'Abbas' pan-Arabism, however, takes on a more separatist angle for the desires of what the Arab identity should be.

'Abbas would have been in university during and after the Israeli-Arab War of June 1967. This was a devastating blow, not only to the politics of the region, with the Israeli Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, but to the very core of Arab identity and statehood. Arab national leaders and the Arab public self-identified as the victims of a *nakbah* [disaster]. The idea that Israel had bested them not through strategy, but through unchivalrous actions and a through support from the West (Europe and the US). The popular opinion was that there was nothing that could have been done to prevent this disaster, that a crime had been committed by

Zionists against Arabs and the only way to move forward was to wait for the inevitable defeat of Israel and this new form of colonialism.

Not everyone was convinced, however. In 1968 Sadik Jalal Al-Azm published *Al-Nakd Al-Dhati Ba'da Al-Hazima* (Self-Criticism After the Defeat 1967); in which argues that although a crime was committed by the state of Israel against the Arab nations, the defeat cannot be solely attributed to factors out of the control of the Arab public or leadership. Instead, Al-Azm stressed that Arabs had to take responsibility for *al-nakbah* and the solution moving away from the defeat was not to wait, but for Arabs themselves to reevaluate Arab identity and lifestyle. He argues on a variety issues including the modernity of the Arab populations and the competency (or his belief of the lack thereof) of Arab leadership and militaries all through the lens of self-criticism.

Although Al-Azm's book was banned in most Arab countries, Lebanon was willing to produce the book despite the controversy, and it is here that 'Abbas encounters these ideas. Fresh out of college, and fresh out of defeat, 'Abbas believes Al-Azm when he asserts that "Arab underdevelopment in production, technology, science, planning and leadership is the latent source, to a great extent, of the lack of this sort of practical effectiveness among Arabs today." So Al-Nur becomes an architectural engineer, and actively resists the backwardness he sees in Arab society. When Al-Azm attacks the belief that Israel committed some form of unchivalrous treachery against the Arab nations, 'Abbas agrees because he grew up in a state who was created in direct opposition to Zionism and European colonialism. For 'Abbas there was never an alliance between Israel and the Arab nations because Israel was created to destroy them. 'Abbas was soon convinced that the only way that Arabs could move forward from such a defeat and build a world and society where they would be able to defend and validate themselves was through themselves. He believes that Arab nations are victims of crimes such as the June War of

1967, the Israeli occupation of Israel, and economic exploitation, because they are too busy “playing” the victim and are not helping themselves become better and stronger to defend themselves. 'Abbas is not like those Arabs -- the Arabs who play victim, the Arabs who call for the liberation of Jerusalem but are silent at the mention of US and Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war. 'Abbas is critical of the Arabs who seek help from others and of non-Arabs who offer help; he believes Arabs are capable by themselves and through themselves to better their situations.

I carefully created each of these characters and tried to make them as fully inhabited as possible to make them natural and believable in order to make them accessible and easier to relate to. Wendy and Peter do not represent xenophobia, 'Abbas does not represent pan-Arabism, Selma does not represent Arab nationalism, and Hansel and Raheela do not represent interracial relationships. These are people who exist in the streets, in homes, in our jobs, people we should interact with everyday. They inhabit sentiments and ideas that we encounter and discuss with each other everyday. By the end of this story there is no resolution, because the conversation is ongoing. Wendy and Peter do not realize at the end that racism is bad. Hansel and Raheela do not realize that their peacekeeping tactics are harmful. Selma and 'Abbas do not realize there are other solutions to their problems outside of their own experiences. None of this happens in this story because it rarely happens in life. All of the ideologies, sentiments, and ideas present in the story are present in life and are just as hard to grapple with and dismantle. It is possible however, to exist with all of these ideas and handle them with grace and civility; and I hope that the story of the Al-Nurs and the Nuñezes, although sometimes lacking grace, knocks on the door that opens to endless possibilities of coexistence in diversity in our own lives.

Still Work To be Done

Although this project was successful and a joy to work on there were obstacles during the process that I was not able to overcome. My intention was to try and cast as many people of color that would be willing to participate in this project. Of my six person cast, only one of the actors was Latino and another was not an American citizen. My cast was talented and brought *Dinner in America* to life in a way that exceeded my expectations and was not detrimental to the production, but my goal for inclusivity fell a bit short. I am not sure if this problem arose because of an issue in diversity at Bard or because of the larger issue of theater's accessibility to people of color. I also wanted to invite as many non-actors to perform for the show. This was, again, in the hopes of making theater and art making a more inclusive space. Although all six of the actors in *Dinner in America* had acted before, they were able to create a space that was not stifling or alienating. I see this as an example that it is possible to create something new and hopeful with the pieces of an institution that are already in place.

Dinner in America was an experiment and a challenge for me. I was not sure how it would turn out as a script or as a production. As a script I hope that it gives a voice to those whose voices have been muffled or silenced and as a production I hope it encourages more people to participate in theater. The resources and people that I had here at Bard College affected the outcome and led my project to a different destination than I had envisioned. It did not hurt my project, but only allowed for more opportunity for discussion and critical thinking about theater and the world. The project was successful in that it gave space for voices that often go unheard, it gave legitimacy to sentiments and ideologies that are too often dismissed. Most importantly, it drew the public in, along with regular theater goers, to exist with difference and suspend (even if for just a moment) that difference only divides.

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Appendix:

Dinner in America

by Triston Tolentino

Characters:

Hansel Nuñez	Twenty-seven, hasn't been home in 8 years. Has just arrived from Lebanon with some interesting news
Wendy Nuñez	Fifty-six, a Spanish teacher at her local high school in Lynbrook, NY. Raised in a Cuban household in the Bronx, Wendy is sure in her ways and will tell you when she has a problem.
Peter Nuñez	Fifty-eight, a construction foreman. Raised in a Dominican household in the Lower East Side. Peter is set in his ways, but will hear anyone out and will happily agree to disagree. Family comes first for him.
Raheela Al-Nur	Twenty-six, born and raised in Lebanon. Studied International Relations at the American University of Beirut and works with organizations helping the Palestinian effort.
'Abbas Al-Nur	Sixty-seven, an architectural engineer. Born and raised in Syria, 'Abbas has strong feelings about Western/American culture. Raised Christian, 'Abbas is a moral man.
Selma Al-Nur	Sixty-five, an accountant for a firm in Beirut. Born in Jerusalem, raised in Beirut, Selma is a passive woman who is always willing to hear the other side, and will provide a counter, but would never infringe on anyone's lifestyle. Raised Muslim, but abandoned her faith in adulthood.

Setting:

Present Day.

The Nuñez household. Their dining room table. It is already set with plates and silverware. There is a table in the corner with a radio on it. The house is clean, spotless even.

PETER

So... they aren't Muslim?

HANSEL

[massaging the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger]

No.

PETER

So they're...?

WENDY

They're Catholics, Peter. Like us. Except, maybe *they* go to church every Sunday.

HANSEL

They're Christian.

WENDY

Same difference.

PETER

No, they say "holy ghost" not "holy spirit".

WENDY

Well they probably say it in their language, so no.

HANSEL

Yes! So what? Don't talk about religion. Don't say God, Allah, Islam, Christ... anything.

PETER

But don't they say that thing?

[snaps his fingers trying to remember]

"Assalamu alaykum!" That's religious.

HANSEL

Yes, but everyone says that. It's basically hello.

PETER

What is it that you have to say back?

HANSEL

Why?

PETER

What if they say it, I don't want to look stupid.

HANSEL

"W'alaykum salaam" but they aren't going to say it. So don't say it. Just say, "hello."

PETER

[to himself]

"Assalamu alaykum, wa alaykum salaam, assalamu alaykum, wa alaykum salaam..."

WENDY

Don't they speak English?

HANSEL

Perfectly.

WENDY

That's good. How did you meet this girl again?

HANSEL

We go to the same coffee shop in Beirut. And we started talking.

WENDY

So you just picked this girl off of the street.

PETER

He said he found her in a coffee shop.

HANSEL

I didn't just pick her up off the street. We were friends first, naturally.

[Pause.]

What are you cooking? It smells great.

WENDY

Pernil. With rice and a little side salad.

[she gives him a proud smile but loses it quickly]

That's not a problem is it?

HANSEL

Why would that be a problem?

WENDY

Can't they not eat pork?

HANSEL

Why wouldn't they be able to eat pork?

WENDY

Because they're Arabic.

HANSEL

They're Arab, not Arabic. And I already told you that they're Christian.

[Wendy looks confused.]

Muslims and Jews don't eat pork... Look, they aren't much different from you. So just be... nice, please.

PETER

Hansel, why would we be mean?

WENDY

You know how we raised you, I don't know what they taught you over there but I know what I taught you and you best not forget that. What's her name again? Rachel?

HANSEL

Raheela.

PETER

In English please.

HANSEL

Ra-hee-la.

PETER

Rahila.

HANSEL

No. Not hill. Heel. Raheela.

PETER

Raheela.

WENDY

No, he did it harder on the "h". Raheela.

HANSEL

Yes. Wow, actually yes. Thank you.

WENDY

I *am* a Spanish teacher, Hansel. And her parents?

HANSEL

'Abbas and Selma.

PETER

Abus and Selma.

HANSEL

'A-bb-as. Hold the b longer. And not "bus," "bas."

PETER

Abb-ass.

HANSEL

Not, "ass." 'Abb-ass, no, wait, Jesus. 'Abb-as.

PETER

How do you do that thing with your throat in the beginning?

HANSEL

Don't worry about that. Abbas.

PETER

Abbas. Abbas and Selma. Which one is which?

WENDY

Selma is the mother, Peter. Jesus, I swear he's slow. Early onset dementia.

PETER

I'm kidding! I'm sharp as a tack.

WENDY

I'm pretty sure a butter knife is sharper than you Peter.

[she laughs at her own joke and Hansel joins]

Oh my god, you should have seen him the other day. "Babe! Where is my toolbelt! Babe! I need my tool belt, I'm going to be late." He comes into the room...

[she laughs and tries to control herself]

He was wearing it!

[goes into hysterics while Peter bashfully shakes his head]

HANSEL

[getting his laughter under control]

Remember that time... remember that time when he left for work. And when I was driving to school I saw him driving back... And when I rolled down my window to ask what happened he just looked at me and laughed and went, "Don't tell your mom, but I wasn't scheduled today, but as far as she knows they just didn't need me."

WENDY

[laughing]

And he thought I would believe that!

[The whole family is in hysterics when the doorbell rings. Hansel immediately stops while his parents simmer down.]

HANSEL

I'll get it.

[gets up for the door]

WENDY

Excuse you. You don't live here anymore, remember? I will get it.

[goes to the door, Peter and Hansel trail behind her]

PETER

We shoulda put a metal detector.

[he frames the door with his hands and chuckles. Hansel slaps him on the chest and shakes his head]

I'm kidding... we shoulda got a dog.

[Hansel raises his hand again]

Kidding!

WENDY

You two done?

[she opens the door and smiles]

Hello! Welcome, come in, come in!

PETER

[to himself]

Assalamu alaykum!

HANSEL

I'll kill you.

[Enter the Al-Nurs. Abbas shakes Wendy and Peter's hands but embraces Hansel, kissing him on both cheeks. Selma kisses everyone on the cheeks, but gives Hansel and extra one. Raheela follows her mother, but gives Hansel a peck on the lips. Once everyone is inside and introduced, Wendy closes the door.]

ABBAS

We've brought something for you!

WENDY

Oh, you didn't have to do that!

ABBAS

[handing her a bag tied with ribbon]

Nonsense! What kind of guests would we be?

WENDY

See, Peter. Even they get that you bring a gift as a guest.

[she opens the bag and pulls out a bottle]

Oh! Wow! It's...?

SELMA

Wine! From Lebanon, we almost couldn't get it over here!

PETER

But I thought you didn't drink...

HANSEL

That will go great with dinner!

WENDY

Yes! Come sit down. Don't worry about your shoes. Got hardwood for a reason! How long have you been here? In New York?

[They all make their way to the table and find a seat.]

RAHEELA

We came with Hansel actually. So about a week.

PETER

Why didn't you just come stay with us?

WENDY

I'm sure they had better things to do, Peter. I wish I had known that you drink! I would have picked up something!

SELMA

No, no, don't worry, Abbas has to drive, and once he gets going he won't stop.
[she chuckles]

WENDY

What about you?

SELMA

Oh, I don't like to drive. Especially in a place I have never been.

WENDY

I mean drinking *mija!*

SELMA

Oh! Neither of us would be able to drive if there was more!

[They all laugh]

WENDY

[pointing at Peter]

This one will buy a six pack and it will be gone the day he gets it. He thinks I don't notice...

PETER

Hey, I'm a hardworking man, I think I can have a few every now and then.

HANSEL

Okay, Abbas.

[They all laugh as Abbas playfully threatens Hansel. It takes a few seconds for them to simmer down.]

WENDY

The food won't be ready for a few minutes, would you like to see the rest of the house?

SELMA

If it is as lovely as what I have seen I would love to!

WENDY

Oh, I like you! Come, come. Hansel, stay here for when the oven beeps.

PETER

I'll stay too.

[Wendy takes the Al-Nurs off, she can occasionally be heard laughing.]

HANSEL

What?

PETER

She's pretty.

HANSEL

Okay.

PETER

Dude, why are you stressing?

HANSEL

I just don't want either of you two to say something dumb.

PETER

[chuckling]

We just want what's best for you. Just take a deep breath. We all seem civil.

[The oven beeps and Hansel goes off. The beeping stops and he returns with wine glasses. He sets them on the table.]

PETER

You tried this before?

[he inspects the bottle]

HANSEL

It's pretty good.

PETER

I thought they didn't drink.

HANSEL

Who is they?

[Peter makes a gesture with his hand, "them"]

I don't know what that means. You said yourself, "if you don't drink or eat meat, there's something wrong with you."

PETER

Exactly! So are you guys living together, or?

HANSEL

What does it matter?

PETER

You know I'm not serious right? With the jokes.

HANSEL

Well I don't think they are funny.

PETER

I would never say it to their face.

HANSEL

Oh, I know you wouldn't, because I'd never come back.

PETER

Is that really what you're holding over my head?

HANSEL

Whatever, I don't think your "jokes" are funny.

[Pause.]

PETER

Do you think that she is the one?

HANSEL

I think so.

PETER

Did you talk with Abus yet?

HANSEL
No I didn't speak with 'Abbas.

PETER
Are you saving up for a ring? Do they do a ring?

HANSEL
Stop saying they.

PETER
Do.... do a ring?

HANSEL
What?

PETER
Nevermind, I guess not.

HANSEL
Don't worry, I'm handling it.

RAHEELA
[Off]
Aww, look at baby Hansel! Look!

HANSEL
The oven beeped!

[Everyone enters]

RAHEELA
Your mother was showing us your baby album.

SELMA
You are crying in all the pictures!

PETER
Yeah, I think he was getting it out of his system. Because now you can barely get a chuckle out of this guy. He needs to loosen up a bit.

ABBAS
There is something to be appreciated about seriousness.

RAHEELA
But you can laugh every once in awhile.
[she tickles Hansel's neck and he recoils and grabs her hand.]

WENDY

He just knows when to be serious and when to let go. He got that from me.

SELMA

Hansel is a hard working man. I'm glad we finally get to see where he gets it from.

WENDY

Thank you.

PETER

Thank you.

[They look at each other then at Hansel.]

WENDY

Hansel, where do you get your work ethic from?

HANSEL

I don't know. I guess from both of you.

RAHEELA

He isn't very handy, so I am going to say you Mrs. Nuñez.

WENDY

[chuckling]

Oh really? Are you still afraid of dirt Hansel?

ABBAS

Afraid of dirt?

PETER

When all of the kids were playing in the sand or in the grass, there would be Hansel.

[he sits upright, making a petrified face with his hands up, miming as if he were avoiding touching something]

HANSEL

You're exaggerating.

WENDY

Or when he would get dirty by accident he'd freeze. All life stopped until Hansel was clean again.

[Everyone but Hansel is laughing]

RAHEELA

Well he isn't afraid to get dirty anymore, but he does have to build up the courage clean the bathroom when it's his turn.

WENDY

Wow, he cleans the bathroom now. Tell me your secret, I could barely get him to clean a dish when he lived here!

ABBAS

Was Hansel a trouble child?

[to Raheela]

Is that what it is?

WENDY

Problem child? No! He was good. He just always walked to his own beat. And sometimes he walks too fast where he probably shouldn't even be.

SELMA

Well at least he is ambitious! Raheela actually believed she wasn't going to university! She thought she could "figure it out!" Huh!

WENDY

Oh no, Hansel knew he wasn't just going to lay around here for free. It was either get a job or go to college. I guess the joke was on us though, when we said that we would help pay for where he wanted to go.

ABBAS

Did your parents help pay for your schooling?

WENDY

Only because I went to a state school. It was cheap enough with my scholarship. But these "ivy leagues" that aren't even really ivy leagues are ridiculous. Sixty thousand dollars a year for what?

RAHEELA

Well it looks like Hansel made the best of it though!

PETER

Yeah, but now who's in debt?

HANSEL

Me!

WENDY

And who's fault is that? I told you...

HANSEL

It's no one's fault! That's just what it is.

ABBAS

Thankfully, Raheela got a full scholarship.

RAHEELA

Ya baba...

WENDY

For what?

ABBAS

For her outstanding volunteer service with the refugee crisis in Beirut.

WENDY

Why are people leaving Beirut?

SELMA

People are running *to* Beirut.

[The whole room becomes tense.]

PETER

The food is ready right?

WENDY

Yes! Hansel, come help me bring the food.

SELMA

Sit Hansel, Raheela and I will help. *Yallah.*

[she waves at Raheela who gets up with little protest]

[The women exit]

PETER

So, uh, Abbas. Have you lived in Beirut your whole life?

ABBAS

No, I was born in Syria. I moved to Lebanon after college and have lived there since.

PETER

Where in Syria?

ABBAS

A small village southeast of Aleppo.

PETER

Oh, how was that?

ABBAS

I don't really understand your question.

PETER

I mean, what was it like living there? Was it hard? What was your childhood like?

ABBAS

Was it hard? Was what hard?

[Peter opens his mouth to say something but stops and looks to Hansel]

HANSEL

What was it that your parents did again?

ABBAS

My father was a driver, he would drive people to and from Aleppo, as well as around Aleppo. And my mother worked when she could, usually cleaning houses in Aleppo.

PETER

Did you ever live in Aleppo?

ABBAS

Only for University.

PETER

Have you been back since you moved? Obviously not recently.

ABBAS

A few times. Less since my parents died. Yes you're right, not since the war. But it is always good to touch back with your roots.

PETER

You hear that Hansel?

ABBAS

You've been back to the States a few times, you haven't come back here?

HANSEL

There was never any time.

ABBAS

There is always time for family.

PETER

Always.

[Selma, Wendy and Raheela enter each carrying a pot, tray, and bowl. They set them on the table and Wendy uncovers each revealing rice, a large piece of meat, and a colorful green salad.]

WENDY

Eat up!

[Selma serves Abbas, then Raheela, then herself and sits back down. Wendy, Hansel, and Peter serve themselves and once everyone is settled they begin to eat.]

WENDY

The wine!

[Peter gets up and gets the bottle opener and bottle and opens the wine. He pours for Abbas, Selma, then Raheela. Then for Wendy, Hansel and the last bit for himself.]

RAHEELA

I told you we should have gotten a second bottle.

WENDY

Don't worry about it! I'm sure we have something in the basement. Unless you finished it.

PETER

I'm sure there's something, but I'm fine really. If you guys want anything I can go check.

ABBAS

I think we are all okay for now.

WENDY

[takes a sip of the wine]

Mmm! This is good! Thank you!

ABBAS

Maybe Hansel can bring some back next time he comes.

WENDY

If he ever comes back. What do you guys have that keeps him over there? I would love to know!

PETER

We were just talking about that.

RAHEELA

Beirut is a beautiful city, the beaches are amazing, and the mountains! You should definitely visit if you ever get the chance.

WENDY

Maybe I will. See what's so great about it.

[They all continue eating. An awkward silence ensues.]

RAHEELA

[After a few moments.]
Uhm, how about some music?

[There is general agreement. Hansel gets up and walks over to the radio and plugs his phone in. He walks over to his seat and sits back down.]

HANSEL

It's syncing up.

[A spanish guitar begins to play, the beginning of Souad Massi's "Ech Edani."]

WENDY

[excited]
Ooh, what song is this?

HANSEL

I don't know, I just put on whatever my last radio was.

[The Spanish chorus begins to sing and the riff to the song begins.]

SELMA

Oh, this is Souad Massi!

PETER

Who?

[The verse begins and the Arabic hits Wendy's ears hard but she remains silent. Throughout the song Wendy is displeased. Peter progressively enjoys it more and even starts dancing in his seat by the end. Selma nods her head to the beat as Abbas patiently waits for the song to end. Hansel quietly sings the Arabic chorus. Raheela sings the Spanish chorus, trying not to get too carried away. The songs ends and the next song begins to play. This song is much less deceiving than the last, however.]

WENDY

I think that is enough music now.

[Hansel gets up and unplugs his phone. He returns to his seat, he is even more tense. Another awkward silence.]

ABBAS

You are a construction worker, right, Mr. Nuñez?

PETER

I'm a Project Supervisor at ConEd. And please, call me Peter.

SELMA

ConEd?

PETER

It is one of the electrical companies in the area. I oversee projects like replacing wires and grids. It's a cushy job, I like it, good benefits, good pay, nine to six Monday to Friday. Can't really complain I guess.

ABBAS

I ask because I remember Hansel mentioning it, and I remembered by looking at your hands; they are that of a working man.

RAHEELA

Ya baba!

PETER

[*chuckling*]
I take that as a compliment.

ABBAS

It is! There is no shame in a hard working individual, Raheela.

PETER

Yeah, I wasn't always a supervisor, had to work my way up to that.

WENDY

And what do you do Abbas?

ABBAS

I am an architectural engineer. I design buildings and other structures. I work my own hours and the pay is good. I can't really complain.

SELMA

And you are a teacher Wendy?

WENDY

Yes, a Spanish teacher at Lynbrook High School.

SELMA

I would love to learn Spanish. Raheela took it for a few years when she attended the American school. Do you remember anything?

RAHEELA

A little bit.

WENDY

Oh, sí?

RAHEELA

Sí, un poco, pero se fue muchos años ya que hable. No me recuerdo mucho.

WENDY

Pero tu acento es muy bien, hablas Español con mi hijo?

RAHEELA

Más Árabe que Inglés o Español en realidad.

WENDY

Que interesante.

ABBAS

What is this about Arabic? I thought we were not allowed to speak Arabic?

PETER

Allowed to speak Arabic, what does that mean?

RAHEELA

I just didn't want anyone to feel excluded... I'm sorry...

[Abbas shoots her a look]

Aasfa.

WENDY

Sorry, that was my fault. I was just surprised how good her accent was. You should give yourself more credit.

ABBAS

If only her Arabic were just as credit worthy.

SELMA

Abbas.

RAHEELA

My Arabic is fine.

ABBAS

“Fine.” Like fine wine? Or *tamaam*, fine?

SELMA

Abbas, now is not the time.

WENDY

Oh, is she like Hansel with Spanish? He'll swear he knows it like the back of his hand but when you try to have a conversation with him... *nada*.

PETER

I told you we should have spoken it more when he was growing up.

ABBAS

[looking at Selma, gestures towards the Nuñezes]
Ah-ho!

HANSEL

Well, I'm glad we can all agree no one is perfect.

[Pause.]

RAHEELA

Did Hansel tell you what he is working on right now?

PETER

He didn't.

RAHEELA

He is helping start an academy for Syrian refugees across Lebanon.

WENDY

An academy for what?

RAHEELA

An academy to teach refugees English, arts, maths and sciences.

PETER

Good pay?

HANSEL

We are planning to make it a non-profit.

PETER

So no money.

HANSEL

No, that's not what non-profit means. It means that all money we make must go to the academy, including employees and owners. I would keep my other jobs, this is something I am doing with the money I make from those.

WENDY

Why are you teaching them English?

HANSEL

What do you mean?

ABBAS

She means, why must they learn English? What will they gain from that after they finish this academy?

RAHEELA

It's a good skill to have. Why did you learn English? Why did you send me to an American school?

SELMA

We thought it was going to be a better education for you than the regular public school system in Lebanon.

RAHEELA

And it was!

ABBAS

La'. They prioritized the wrong things for you. You were forgetting who you were and where you came from, we should have sent you to one of the French schools.

RAHEELA

What are you talking about? I was learning so much. And *wallah?* The French schools. You saw the kids that came out of those schools.

WENDY

Why did you pull her out of the American schools? Aren't they better?

ABBAS

They are better equipped. They have better facilities and are seen as "better," but we are not American so there was no reason for her to be in an American school.

RAHEELA

You think I was becoming American? Ha! I was not forgetting who I was! You made sure of that.

HANSEL

Well we aren't trying to open another American school. It's a different system.

ABBAS

I know you know better than to do something like that. But I still don't understand why they must learn English.

RAHEELA

I don't think that anyone is saying that anyone *must* learn English, but it is a good skill to have, and you, of all people, have benefitted from it a great deal.

ABBAS

Just because something is, does not make it right.

WENDY

I just think that teaching them English will encourage them to come over here.

HANSEL

What?

PETER

It's just so hard to come here. You don't want to get these people's hopes up. You might be giving them the tools to better themselves but then what?

HANSEL

I don't think anyone is going to get their hopes up. I think you've made it pretty clear who do and who you don't want here.

WENDY

I know you aren't talking to me. I'm not saying anyone can't come here...

RAHEELA

Either way! Hansel is doing a great thing for Syrian refugees, and I thought you would like to know.

ABBAS

But it's true.

PETER

What is?

ABBAS

We need to be less dependent on people. This is what got us in the mess we are today.

SELMA

Who is we?

WENDY

People in general.

ABBAS

That. And Arabs. How do we expect to get help when we can't even help ourselves.

HANSEL

I think it is a bit more complex than that.

ABBAS

Always with the complexities. We didn't ask for help. Yet you still try.

RAHEELA

Baba, don't talk to him like that.

ABBAS

I am not talking to him, I'm speaking generally.

PETER

I always told him, "You're going to go over there, and see, they don't want your help."

SELMA

It's not always about what you want.

HANSEL

There is a difference between helping someone, and helping someone help themselves.

WENDY

Right, and you've figured it all out.

HANSEL

I'm sorry, but I'm pretty sure *Abuela* and *Mamá* didn't just decide to swim over to Miami and start from scratch when they landed on the beach.

WENDY

Basically. They did what they had to do to help their families. They would never have begged for a dime.

ABBAS

And here we are, begging people to finish our wars for us. From the very people that started them.

RAHEELA

What are you even saying? It's nobody's fault that the world is messed up. Especially not Hansel's!

SELMA

I don't think anyone is blaming Hansel for trying to help.

WENDY

No, it's a terrible situation you guys are in. But I don't think it should be our job to start letting people in. We have enough problems as is.

PETER

Yeah, between illegals coming in and the debt crisis, we can't really take on a refugee crisis too.

RAHEELA

Your parents were immigrants, running from oppression and hardship.

WENDY

Yes, but they did it the right way. They earned what they got, they worked for it.

PETER

Exactly. It's not fair that people can just come in because they couldn't make it work in their country and are just reaping the benefits while I pay mine and their taxes.

ABBAS

Everyone is looking for a handout and is not willing to try to make a change.

RAHEELA

How can you say that? You're Syrian. You think they asked for war? No one wants war, or wants to need to be helped.

ABBAS

This isn't a Syrian problem. This is an Arab problem. I grew up in it. I've seen this since my childhood. Everyone wants to claim to something so specific. Palestinians, Egyptians, Syrians... we are all Arab. Yet we all want to stake a claim in dirt, and that's the problem.

SELMA

I think everyone has their own stories and experiences and it isn't really fair to judge anyone you don't know.

PETER

I totally see what you are saying but it's becoming a pattern... a trend almost.

HANSEL

Wanting to have an identity is trendy?

PETER

No not trendy. I'm just saying, you can't have everything you want. And if you can't get it on your own then... don't ask for help.

WENDY

Especially mine.

ABBAS

We all have to worry about our own problems, and who we are, and who we need to be.

WENDY

That's right.

PETER

Look Hansel, we're glad you're trying to help, but just think about the bigger picture.

HANSEL

Bigger picture... well, we're in a very early and fragile stage, it might not even happen, so everyone can calm down.

[Awkward silence. Everyone eats.]

WENDY

What do you do for work Raheela?

RAHEELA

I work for PR for an NGO that helps with the Palestinian struggle. I do a lot of media and outreach, getting donors and advertising.

SELMA

Who knew you could get paid for using Facebook?

RAHEELA

It's a bit more than that.

PETER

Hey, money is money, work is work.

ABBAS

Money is indeed money, but if we all went to school to work cleaning bathrooms, that would be a little ridiculous.

WENDY

Somebody has to do it. Just not us.

ABBAS

Exactly.

PETER

That reminds me of Kafka. Are any of you familiar with Kafka? I know one of you two is.

HANSEL

Are *you* familiar with Kafka?

PETER

Yeah, bet you didn't think I was. But I am.

SELMA

What were you saying about Kafka?

PETER

I just finished *The Trial* the other day, and it was really interesting how everyone kind of has their own job, does it, and they don't really question it. Wouldn't that be a weird way to live? To just do the same thing every day, stay in line and question nothing. And when you do, you end up dead!

RAHEELA

[*under her breath*]
Inconceivable.

SELMA

That is very interesting. I remember reading a little Chekhov when I was in school.

PETER

The Bet?

SELMA

Yes!

[*Hansel looks at Raheela, confused, they debate whether or not to intervene and check in every so often*]

SELMA

Isn't it amazing how we perceive things as being so easy from the other side!?

PETER

I really love how the lawyer spends so much time learning about the world, and ends up realizing that it's not all worth it? Do you think that's true? That is not all worth it?

WENDY

Of course it's all worth it. What kind of question is that Peter?

ABBAS

Are you religious?

RAHEELA

[*in Arabic, "What did I say?"*]
Shu, altu!?

SELMA

You also said no 'Arabi...

ABBAS

Right, sorry. Apparently I'm not supposed to talk about religion.

PETER

Neither are we.

[Pause.]

So are you religious?

WENDY

I would say that I am.

ABBAS

You're Christian right?

PETER

I am yes.

ABBAS

Not you, Selma?

WENDY

I was raised Muslim, but I didn't really keep with it.

SELMA

Why not?

PETER

I don't know. My faith was never really the strongest. I wish I was religious in any kind of capacity. Maybe one day.

SELMA

So what do you think about ISIS?

WENDY

Wendy...

PETER

I think, I'm with the majority in that I think that they are awful. They don't represent Islam. Definitely not the Islam that I was raised with.

SELMA

So you had a good experience growing up?

PETER

I didn't have a bad one. I just didn't believe. It was neither here nor there.

SELMA

Raheela what about you?

WENDY

RAHEELA

They raised me Christian, but I don't really know. I'm kind of in the middle.

PETER

The middle? The middle of what?

RAHEELA

The middle of believing and not believing? I can't really say for sure if there is a God. I'm open.

WENDY

Why not just believe then?

HANSEL

Why don't you just not believe?

WENDY

Because that's not how it works.

SELMA

Do you think that there is a universal way for it to work?

PETER

Hey, everyone can do what's best for them. Can't make anyone believe something they don't want to. I just think it's interesting how you can live with so much uncertainty.

RAHEELA

It's more of an acceptance of not understanding. You don't know everything about your God and what they do and why they do what they do. But you accept it. I accept something else.

ABBAS

Which is a fancy way of saying, "I don't know."

SELMA

No. It's an explanation to your questions.

WENDY

Well, as long as you are a good person you can believe in one hundred gods. That's just your own problem.

[*Pause.*]

ABBAS

Look at that. The world didn't explode at the mention of God.

[*The parents laugh as Hansel and Raheela finally let out a breath.*]

SELMA

This is a beautiful table cloth by the way! I meant to say so earlier.

WENDY

Thank you! It was a gift from my grandmother for me and Peter's wedding. It was one of the only things she was able to get over here from Cuba.

[she strokes the table longingly]

RAHEELA

Oh you really didn't have to bring this out for us! It's so special!

WENDY

This is a special day!

ABBAS

Thank you!

[shoots Raheela a look]

This is a special day! To new friendships!

[He raises his glass and the wine inside swishes around. Some escapes from the glass and falls on the plate.]

SELMA

[In Arabic, "Really man (seriously)! Aren't you listening!?"]
Ya rajil! La' testama'!?

HANSEL

[trying to move quickly from the potential disaster]

To new friendships!

[he raises his glass much more carefully]

[They all raise their glasses and sip. Peter empties his glass and puts it back on the table]

HANSEL

Do you want more? I don't think I'm going to finish this. You gave me a lot.

[Hansel holds his glass out towards Peter]

WENDY

[In Spanish, "If wine falls. You'll see."]

Si calle vino... tu va ver...

PETER

I'm good anyway. Why didn't you put like a plastic over it or something.

WENDY

My mother used to do that. I have no idea where she got that from, I hated it. It was so ugly. And again, it's a special day, not a kid's birthday party.

ABBAS

My mother used to clean this family's house, she would always come home and complain that they made her take the plastic covers off the sofas and clean them, then put the covers back on. She also mention how ugly they were... The plastic on the sofas, not the family.

[Everyone laughs.]

RAHEELA

So I guess it doesn't take you that long to clean, since you don't believe in plastic covers.

PETER

[scoffs]

Every Saturday, 9 to 1, music blasting, brooms, mops, dusters, vacuums, all full throttle.

HANSEL

Still?

WENDY

I don't know how you guys can just live in a dirty house. The more often you clean the less you have to do.

PETER

So why does it take you so long?

WENDY

Because you have to do it right! Hansel used to go weeks without cleaning his room. He always ran out of clean clothes because he never did laundry regularly. Only when he "needed" to.

SELMA

Sounds like my good friends here.

RAHEELA

No, you clean the house when it is still clean.

HANSEL

Dirt will kill you, don't you know. That or the president could show up any day now.

WENDY

Keep making jokes...

HANSEL

When I trip on a dust bunny I'll stop.

ABBAS

Before we had Raheela, we had a cleaning lady...

RAHEELA

Why only before?

SELMA

Because I stopped working to be home with you. And she didn't really do much.

ABBAS

Well that's because you made me clean, *before* she got there.

SELMA

I didn't want her to think that we were dirty!

WENDY

I'm with you Selma. Why don't we buy these four a house and see how long it takes before they call us because they can't find one of them because they've gone weeks *sin limpia*.

[*she looks around the table at everyone's plate*]

Is everyone done? Does anyone want more?

[*Everyone kindly refuses*]

Do you want me to pack you some to go? For tomorrow? For lunch.

SELMA

No you don't have to.

WENDY

I'll pack you a little. It's fine! The last thing Peter needs is more pork in his life, his blood pressure is high enough.

ABBAS

This is pork?

WENDY

Yeah. Hansel! You said it wasn't a problem!

ABBAS

[*laughing*]

It's not! I've never had pork so tender!

WENDY

It's been in the oven since eight this morning.

ABBAS

Wow. It was delicious, thank you.

WENDY

I'll pack a little extra then. Hansel, help clear the table, since you clean now apparently.

[Wendy and Hansel clear the table, bringing pots, plates, and cups into the kitchen. Wendy returns with a plates and forks and sets them out.]

WENDY

Does anyone want coffee?

SELMA

Do you have tea?

WENDY

Of course! Anyone else?

RAHEELA

I'm fine with coffee.

ABBAS

Coffee is good.

WENDY

Peter?

PETER

I'll just have some of yours.

WENDY

So that's a yes.

[shouting back into the kitchen]

Make enough for everyone! And put some water to boil for tea!

PETER

What's for dessert?

WENDY

You'll find out when the coffee and tea is ready.

PETER

How do you say coffee in Arabic?

SELMA

Qahwa.

PETER

One more time?

SELMA
Qa-hwa.

PETER
 Kahu-wa.

RAHEELA
 That's like the proper way. In everyday conversation we say *ahwa*.

PETER
 Oh oh, Hansel taught me this before you got here. Say "Hello" to me in Arabic.

RAHEELA
Marhaba!

PETER
 No, uh, the other way.

SELMA
Ahlan?

PETER
 No... Ah nevermind, when he comes back.

ABBAS
Assalamu 'alaykum?

[*Hansel enters with mugs*]

PETER
 Wa alaykum salaam!

HANSEL
 What are you doing?

RAHEELA
 [*amused*]
 He's showing us what you taught him.

SELMA
 That was pretty good.

PETER
 Yeah Hansel, you just let me know when that *ahuwa* is ready.
 [*Peter looks to Al-Nurs for approval*]

HANSEL

Jesus.

WENDY

Yeah, you can barely put together English sometimes, last thing you need to do is start picking up Arabic.

SELMA

Was Spanish your first language?

PETER

I kind of was raised with both. I went school and spoke slash learned English and came home to Spanish.

WENDY

Yeah, my mom never even learned English.

ABBAS

Raheela's Arabic was really bad when she was attending the American schools. They taught in English and had Arabic classes.

RAHEELA

My Arabic was fine.

ABBAS

[scoffs]
There's that word again.

PETER

How is Hansel's Arabic?

SELMA

He has a good accent. It's actually very good now that I think about it, I don't usually ask him to repeat things.

ABBAS

When we first met our conversation was entirely in Arabic, and it wasn't until he said he was American that I realized he spoke English.

RAHEELA

I don't know why, I told him you speak English.

HANSEL

I wanted to impress him.

SELMA

Oh and you did, I can barely get him to take me to dinner and sometimes he never shuts up about when the next time he can grab lunch with you.

ABBAS

Well *he* pays for me.

PETER

Hey, Hansel, when are you going to take me out to dinner?

[*They all laugh.*]

HANSEL

Thank you guys for coming out and spending the evening with us!

SELMA

Of course! It was our pleasure. Hopefully next time it's our place!

PETER

Hopefully!

HANSEL

Well now that we are all together, and we are all getting along.

[*to the Al-Nurs*]

Sahh?

[*to the Nuñezes*]

Right?

[*There is general agreement. Hansel gets up from his seat and kneels in front Raheela and pulls a box from his pocket, he opens it and reveals a ring*]

Raheela...

[*the kettle in the kitchen starts whistling. Slight pause.*]

Raheela. Will you marry me?

[*Fade to black*]

[END]