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REVERSE ORIENTALISM: LAILA HALABY'S *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND*

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REVERSE ORIENTALISM: LAILA HALABY'S *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND*

AMANDA LLOYD

ABSTRACT

Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) offers instructive insight into the struggles facing Arab Americans in post 9/11 America. Specifically, Halaby inverts the Western gaze upon the Arab world; in doing so, she represents an America that is conspiratorial and inundated with religious zealotry. After 9/11, Halaby's American characters become increasingly intolerant and distrustful of Arabs and Islamic cultures. Halaby, then, portrays intolerant and xenophobic American characters overwrought with suspicion and paranoia and reveals a post 9/11 America that is rife with anti-Arab racism. Halaby also suggests that the pervasive American perception of a world distinctly divided between East and West only exacerbates global crises such as drought, poverty, and war. She also intimates that the events that occurred on September 11, 2001, were a direct result of these epidemics. Moreover, Halaby proffers a perspective of Americans as ignorantly perceiving the United States as isolated from crises threatening all nations. For this reason, her novel functions as a cautionary tale—instructing Americans to transcend a binary frame of reference in order to avoid further crises from escalating either within or beyond American borders.

There is also a direct correlation between Halaby's novel and Leslie Marmon Silko's 1977 work, *Ceremony*. Both Halaby and Silko weave traditional folktales with their own narratives. In addition, Halaby's implication that the potential for global disasters unites all global citizens in a common fate is reminiscent of Silko's warning that the possibility of nuclear annihilation affects all cultures, regardless of location. Accordingly, both

authors encourage cooperation between Eastern and Western nations and put forward that it is essential for all civilizations to transcend national borders and cultural partitions in order to solve global crises.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

[S]uch locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other.
–Edward Said (5)

Water is life, technology, is power, and humans are thieves. Since the beginning of time, water has been of such fundamental importance that flaunting one’s ownership of it in wasteful fountains became synonymous with wealth. This was as true in Phoenicia as it is now in Phoenix.
–Laila Halaby (245)

Since the events of September 11, 2001, several Arab American authors have published works of fiction depicting Arab American characters struggling to maintain their identity in a society inundated with anti-Arab sentiment. While 9/11 did not establish anti-Arab factions within the United States, it amplified their existence exponentially; what is more, 9/11 propelled Arab Americans out of the realm of the invisible and into a “highly visible community that either directly or indirectly affects America’s so-called culture wars, foreign policy, presidential elections, and legislative tradition” (Salaita, *Arab American* 110). Arab American authors have responded by

portraying characters attempting to come to terms with the complexity of both their hybrid identity and fraught position in the United States, finding themselves disconnected from Arab and American cultures alike.

Arab American characters who are unable to position themselves in either Eastern or Western cultures are common to many fictional accounts of post 9/11 America, and this rendering is undoubtedly applicable to the central characters in Laila Halaby's 2007 work, *Once in a Promised Land*. Prior to the 9/11 attacks, Halaby's protagonists, Jassim and Salwa Haddad, reside as wealthy suburbanites just outside of Tucson, Arizona. After the attacks, Jassim becomes the focus of an unsubstantiated FBI investigation, and Salwa begins to experience longing for her homeland, feeling ostracized by the citizens of the country in which she was born. The post 9/11 moment finds Jassim and Salwa alienated from the lifestyle to which they were once accustomed and estranged from one another; consequently, their marriage begins to fall apart. In spite of the challenges facing her central characters after the attacks, Halaby's novel draws more attention to the shortcomings of the American individuals who interact with her Arab American protagonists than it does to the identity challenges facing the protagonists themselves. When placed in a post 9/11 milieu, Halaby's Arab American characters become increasingly aware that many Americans have adopted the oppositional discourse propagated by the rhetoric of U.S. politicians at the onset of the war on terror, which aggravated the American misperception of Arabic and Islamic immigrants already in existence prior to the 9/11 attacks. Halaby's novel is a particularly compelling account of post 9/11 America because she transposes the American stereotypical image of Arabic

nations; in doing so, she exposes Western extremism, offering an indictment of American society as rife with conspiracy and religious fundamentalism.

Halaby also suggests that the pervasive American perception of a world starkly divided between East and West only exacerbates global crises such as drought, poverty, and war; according to Halaby, the events that occurred on September 11, 2001, were a direct result of these worldwide epidemics, which cannot, ultimately, be contained within the third world. Her novel, therefore, functions as a cautionary tale, instructing Americans to transcend binary discourses in order to avoid further crises from escalating either within or beyond American borderlines. Halaby asserts that the U.S. is as susceptible to crises as nations currently perceived as third world. She does so by drawing attention to class inequalities, ecological disasters, and a troubled youth population existing within the United States and suggesting that, for the most part, the American public and mainstream media overlook and underestimate epidemics taking place within U.S. borders.

Halaby's assessment of the 9/11 attacks as a consequence of a broad spectrum of global concerns is again evidenced in her application of techniques and imagery used by Leslie Marmon Silko in her groundbreaking 1977 work, *Ceremony*. Silko blends traditional Native American folklore with contemporary poetry in order to emphasize her theme of growing transnational warfare. Similarly, Halaby juxtaposes Arabic mythology and Western fairy tales in order to reveal causes of the conflict between Eastern and Western nations that, according to Halaby, are unapparent to many Americans and Arabs alike. Halaby focuses much of her novel on the growing global water shortage, concentrating on regions in the Middle East (where her protagonists were raised) and the

southwestern United States (where her novel is set). Her implication that the potential for global disasters unites all global citizens in a common fate is reminiscent of Silko's warning that the possibility of nuclear annihilation affects all cultures regardless of location. Both authors, then, oppose separation and instead encourage cooperation, putting forward that it is essential for all civilizations to transcend national borders and cultural partitions in order to solve global crises.

CHAPTER II
THE RELEVANCE OF *ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND* TO
POST 9/11 CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS

Although there has been little published criticism of Halaby’s novel to date,¹ an analysis of *Once in a Promised Land* is particularly germane to the critical debate surrounding post 9/11 Arab American literature. Scholars such as Evelyn Alsultany, Nadine Naber, and Steven Salaita have proposed that the events of September 11, 2001, catapulted Arab Americans—who were once perhaps the most invisible members of U.S. society—into a realm of “hypervisibility.”² Naber points out, however, that in the months following the events of 9/11, in spite of the “hypervisibility” that Arab Americans encountered, the initiation of state-sponsored assaults against Arab Americans, such as the “PATRIOT Act, special registration, and FBI investigations” received little attention (“Arab Americans” 2, 3). Instead, most mainstream media outlets focused their coverage on “individual hate crimes that took place in the public sphere while downplaying attacks against those targeted by state violence at detention centers, airports, immigration and

¹ Articles by Georgiana Banita and Ulrike Tancke are discussed later in this chapter. Texts by Steven Salaita and Carol Fadda-Conrey are addressed in Chapters III and IV, respectively.

² Alsultany qtd. in Naber, “Arab Americans” 2; Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders” 37; Salaita, *Arab American* 110

naturalization service centers, and the workplace” (“Arab Americans” 3, 2). The conventional U.S. media overlooked the fact that Arab Americans who had nothing to do with the attacks were under attack themselves. Halaby’s novel pays particular attention to the very instances of state-sponsored violence that Naber mentions. She opens her novel with a scene exposing the treatment of Arab Americans at U.S. airports,³ and one of her central characters, Jassim, becomes the subject of an FBI investigation due to uncorroborated suspicion over his work as a hydrologist.

Most critics entering into a discussion of Arab American literature in a post 9/11 environment build off Edward Said’s seminal 1978 work, *Orientalism*. For example, Maha El Said, in her article “The Face of the Enemy: Arab-American Writing Post-9/11,” points to the fact that, since 9/11 “Arab-Americans, who are a mélange of Arab and American, become trapped in an attempt to redefine their identity, and reconstruct a hybridity that seems impossible in a world that is divided into ‘we’ and ‘them’” (201). While Maha El Said focuses on Arab American poets attempting to represent their identity on their own terms, her description of Arab Americans can also be applied to Halaby’s protagonists, Jassim and Salwa Haddad. Although Alsultany, Naber, and Salaita correctly suggest that Arab Americans were invisible members of U.S. society prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Jassim and Salwa are able to preserve an identity that is both Arab and American during this timeframe. By juxtaposing her wealthy protagonists with less financially fortunate Arab Americans who are initially invisible to even Jassim and Salwa, Halaby suggests their ability to maintain

³ This passage appears only in the hard cover edition of the novel; the implications of its omission in the paperback edition are discussed in Chapter VII.

cultural hybridity is directly related to class structures. On the one hand, they occasionally prepare foods distinct to their homeland and establish friendships with other Arab American families; on the other, they enthusiastically adopt an American way of life, engaging in American consumerism by surrounding themselves with luxuries like high-priced cars, towels larger than sheets, and expensive silk pajamas. However, after the attacks, Jassim and Salwa find it increasingly difficult to maintain their accepted place in American identity. Their Arab American identity becomes all the more tenuous as their interactions with Americans become progressively more strained.

While El Said focuses on the issue of Arab American identity in post 9/11 America, Hosam Aboul-Ela calls for Arab American novelists to offer an overtly political response to anti-Arab racism. In his article “Edward Said’s *Out of Place*: Criticism, Polemic, and Arab American Identity,” Aboul-Ela notes, “The post-September 11 moment in Arab American history has seen an acceleration of interest in [a] ‘multicultural’ view of Arabs in the United States” one that “treat[s] the Arab American experience as a set of specific anthropological details related to cuisine, courtship, religion, language, and various social practices” (16). Aboul-Ela believes that this approach is potentially obstructive, and therefore argues that “a dissident relationship to United States foreign policy in the Middle East is foundational to the experience of many Arab Americans and to a potential sense of Arab American community” (15). Aboul-Ela maintains that Arab American literature since 9/11 is often written from a “multicultural” and sometimes counterproductive perspective:

[E]ven a few novels have appeared by writers of Arab descent; while the vast majority of this work has held to a high artistic standard that suggests

Arab American diversity, its packaging has been opportunistic and openly ethnic. (16)

Aboul-Ela's representation of post 9/11 Arab American fiction should not be applied to Halaby's novel, as a variety of dissident politics is central to her work. Moreover, while some of her Arab American characters practice Arab cultures and traditions, Jassim and Salwa are rarely depicted as doing so. They are avid participants in American consumer culture, and their home is typical of a wealthy American couple, lacking almost any indication that they once resided in another part of the world:

That afternoon, driving up recently repaved asphalt to his nestled-in-the-hills home, Jassim pulled up his glinty Mercedes next to one of many identical expectant mailboxes, each painted a muted rusty brown ... in the coolness of his house, Jassim removed a gleaming glass from a glossy maple cabinet and filled it with the purest spring water money could buy ... [h]e pulled the trashcan out from under the right side of the sink (the spot where 92 percent of Americans keep their kitchen trashcans, he remembered hearing somewhere, though he doubted the statistic) so that he could reach the recycling basket, into which he deposited a handful of direct mail and ads (except for Salwa's overpriced-underwear-catalogue ...) Salwa's two magazines (one ... with a photograph of someone's pristine white living room) found themselves on top of the underwear catalogue. (23-24)

Although Jassim and Salwa are devout consumers, one still might expect them to maintain their devotion to Islam; instead, they rarely engage in religious practices.

Jassim, in fact, is portrayed as not particularly spiritual:

Jassim delighted in the stillness the morning offered, a time before emotions were awake, a time for contemplation. This day was no exception as he got up, washed his face, brushed his teeth, and relieved himself, the beginning of a morning ritual as close to prayer as he could allow. (3)

Halaby places her novel on both sides of the critical debate outlined by El Said and Aboul-Ela. She portrays some Arab American characters practicing Arabic traditions, yet in some parts of the novel, she depicts Jassim and Salwa as almost de-cultured in contrast to her other Arab American characters. Halaby implies that the alienation Jassim and Salwa experience after the attacks is heightened because of their adoption of an American way of life and pursuit of the American dream. Halaby envisions Salwa's friend, Randa, for example, as more content with her existence in America than Salwa due to her dedication to Arabic customs Salwa does not practice. When Salwa's marriage begins to unravel, she becomes homesick and seeks solace in Randa's company.

Randa prepares Arabic coffee for the two women:

Randa pulled the pot off the burner and added two spoonfuls of coffee, each heaped to the ceiling. She stirred them in, reached across the continental United States, stretched her arm across the Atlantic until she found Beirut, and ... the coffee boiled away thousands of miles of homesickness. (283-284)

As well as offering a unique juxtaposition of Arab American characters adhering to customs with her protagonists who are less traditional, Halaby also engages in the political discourse that Aboul-Ela requests. For instance, she portrays shortsighted American characters placing flags on their cars instead of coming to an understanding of the actual crisis at hand. One of Salwa's coworkers offers her an American flag decal in an effort to counter the racism she is sure Salwa is bound to face: "You should put one on your car, on the back window. You never know what people are thinking, and having this will let them know where you stand" (55). Furthermore, Penny, a waitress at Denny's who Jassim befriends after the attacks, wishes she were younger so that she might enlist in the American armed forces to "show all those terrorists what Americans were made of, how they were continuing the great history of this country, getting out there and saving poor people from the oppression of living in their backward countries" (280). Through Penny, Halaby often evokes the polarizing discourse put forward by the Bush administration shortly after the attacks, particularly the widely known statement, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."⁴ Although Halaby's novel does not solely revolve around the events of 9/11, she frequently depicts her characters reacting not only to the attacks on the Twin Towers, but also to the so-called war on terror:

Each time the president spoke about the War on Terror [Penny] was outraged, sickened that there were people so sinister that they would want to harm innocent Americans ... As the president said, Americans were

⁴ U.S. politicians frequently used versions of this expression after the 9/11 attacks. George W. Bush perhaps made the dualism most famous on September 20, 2001, in an address to a Joint Session of Congress.

bringing democracy to places that knew only tyranny and terror, that didn't have freedom to choose. (280)

While Halaby's Arab American characters are not overtly political (in fact, when Marcus is interviewed by the FBI, he describes Jassim as "apolitical"), Halaby's novel itself is intensely political (224). By depicting American characters repeating the xenophobic and divisive discourse put forward by U.S. media outlets and politicians, Halaby is practicing the dissent to American foreign policy that Aboul-Ela calls for.

Although the Bush administration and U.S. mainstream media were not exclusively responsible for racializing the post 9/11 moment, Halaby focuses on these two particular channels of communication in her novel. Georgiana Banita, in her article "Race, Risk, and Fiction in the War on Terror: Laila Halaby, Gayle Brandeis, and Michael Cunningham," examines what she refers to as the "second wave" of post 9/11 literature—authors who choose to focus on the implications of the war on terror rather than on the days and months directly following the attacks:

The division of the world into good and evil as proposed by the Bush administration in the days leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan and the start of the war on terror culminated in what may be called moral racialization, that is, the articulation of a racially suspicious enemy figure propagated through the visual media and intended to imbibe and redirect as much public resentment as possible. (245)

Banita concludes that Jassim and Salwa are confronted by "citizens galvanized by Bush's call to act as the eyes and ears of the government" and maintains that Halaby's intent is to

cast Arab Americans as “one step behind other social outsiders” in the eyes of the Americans they encounter (246).

In his article “Uses and Abuses of Trauma in Post-9/11 Fiction and Contemporary Culture,” Ulrike Tancke proposes that the trauma Salwa and Jassim endure has little to do with 9/11, but he neglects to consider the state-sponsored racism that directly resulted from the attacks and its effect on their lives:

It is not the repercussions from 9/11 as such that causes Salwa and Jassim’s life to disintegrate. The traumatizing events in the novel are the result of coincidence and only vaguely connected events, and of the propensity of human beings to ... inflict pain on each other. Hence, *Once in a Promised Land* critically and self-consciously explores the contemporary fascination with trauma: we tend to sweepingly apply ubiquitous and simplistic categories such as “9/11,” while the traumatizing potential of violence and guilt inherent in human relationships are impossible to predict. (85)

While Tancke is correct to point out that 9/11 should not be viewed as the impetus for all of Salwa and Jassim’s marital problems, there is much evidence in the novel to suggest that the events following 9/11 contribute to their divided relationship. Tancke overlooks the suffering the two characters undergo directly resulting from the post 9/11 American image of Arabic culture propagated by government-sponsored racism. After all, Halaby opens her novel with the observation that “Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade

Center. Nothing and everything” (viii). Banita would also argue with Tancke’s position: “Certainly the attacks have a powerful impact on the couple’s lives” (246).

After the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Americans Salwa and Jassim encounter become increasingly intolerant and suspicious. Even the American characters Halaby portrays as racially accepting and open-minded earlier in the novel begin to either distrust Jassim and Salwa or engage in anti-Arab racism as a result of the actions of the U.S. government. For example, Jassim’s boss, Marcus, who initially defends his friend of fifteen years at the onset of an FBI investigation, begins to question Jassim’s innocence during a conversation with his wife:

Something had been different in Jassim lately, something Jassim was not talking to him about. It could be anything, he had told himself over and over. It could be medical, or something in his marriage ... Not for the first time, his wife had brought to the surface the very thing that was nagging at him, harvested that vague doubt that had been lodged way back in his brain, undercutting the faith he had in others. (237)

Although Marcus initially trusts his friend Jassim implicitly, his distrust in him grows after he learns of the FBI investigation, and Jassim’s otherness subsequently becomes all the more apparent to him.

Earlier in the novel, shortly after the attacks, a sales clerk at the mall named Amber follows Jassim and calls a security guard. An enraged Salwa confronts Amber: “Excuse me, young lady ... Why did you call that security guard on my husband?” (29). Amber responds, “He just scared me ... He just stood there and stared for a really long time, like he was high or something. And then I remembered all the stuff that’s been

going on” (30). When Amber’s manager, Mandy, asks Amber why she called security, Amber explains her actions: “You told us to report anything suspicious, and I just thought he looked suspicious” (31). Amber’s misplaced distrust is based simply on Jassim’s non-Western appearance, and for the first time since the attacks, Salwa comes into contact with anti-Arab racism meted out in the form of suspicion.

Other American characters in the novel are only able to see Jassim and Salwa as non-Western others even before the events of 9/11 transpire. Jack Franks, for example, reveals his crushing ignorance of Islamic culture shortly before the attacks occur. Jack meets Jassim at the fitness center, and is distrustful of him instantly solely based upon his appearance. When Jack begins to probe into Jassim’s background, Jassim discloses that he is from Jordan, to which Jack responds, “I went to Jordan once ... followed my daughter there. She married a Jordanian. Not one like you, though. This one was from the sticks—or the sand, as the case was ... [s]he’s converted. She’s an Arab now” (6).

Unlike Jack and Marcus, Penny has and retains faith in Jassim, but Halaby reveals that Penny does not extend the same sympathy to Arabic cultures as a whole. During a conversation she has with her room-mate, Penny discloses the knee-jerk reaction to Arabs she forms after the attacks on the World Trade Center: “Jassim is a good guy—he’s not like them, shouldn’t be judged like them. But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They’re the ones who should be bombed” (281). Halaby implies that Penny does not include Jassim in her sweeping categorization of “them” because of his wealth. By depicting American characters using such racially charged language, Halaby, instead of focusing wholly on the identity struggles of her Arab American characters, also chooses to portray Americans viewing the world with an “us”

versus “them” mentality. This binary divides both East from West and rich from poor alike. Halaby’s point is that, unless Americans are able to regard themselves as global citizens, Eastern and Western cultures will remain alienated and estranged, perpetuating the current crises of drought, poverty, and war occurring in all corners of the globe.

Given the attention Halaby pays to worldwide epidemics, as well as Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and postcolonialism in general, it is especially valuable to apply globalization theory to Halaby’s novel. Simon Gikandi, in particular, offers a perspective instructive to Halaby’s work. In his article “Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality,” Gikandi points to the tendency of colonized countries to revert back to other timeframes in order to refashion their history from a point of view that predates the arrival of the colonizers (615). In doing so, colonized countries create “little” or “local” histories that portray their society in a way that the West would not mark them (615). Colonized nations are then able to both re-establish their true identity and reject the identity that the colonizer has forced upon them.

Both sides of the critical debate concerning the role of Arab American authors in a post 9/11 timeframe adhere to Gikandi’s position, which makes Gikandi’s theory particularly pertinent to *Once in a Promised Land*—a novel situated between the two arguments. El Said, on the one hand, suggests that Arab American writers often focus their attention on issues of family and domesticity in order to maintain their hybrid identities and sense of “Self” (201). Aboul-Ela, while seeming to disagree with El Said, can also be viewed as applying Gikandi’s theory to Arab American authors: instead of requesting Arab American authors to create “little histories” to restore an accurate identity that has not been imposed upon them by colonizing nations, he asks them to

engage in dissent in order to participate in and reconnect with a shared identity, thus separating themselves from an often overwhelming Western culture (15).

CHAPTER III

REVERSE ORIENTALISM

Once in a Promised Land is also distinctive from the “multi-cultural” approach put forward in the initial wave of post 9/11 Arab American literature. Aboul-Ela and Banita discuss because Halaby employs further nuance in her representation of post 9/11 America. While other Arab American authors depict Arab American characters attempting to redefine their identity in a society saturated with anti-Arab racism, Halaby reverses the American stereotypical image of the Arab world, thus portraying American society as conspiratorial and inundated with religious zealotry. Lisa Suhair Majaj defines the Western image of Islamic culture as “caricatured as the epitome of barbarism, repression and irrational political violence” (325). Halaby turns this image on its head and applies it to her American characters when Jassim becomes the subject of the state-sponsored violence to which Naber and Majaj refer—an FBI investigation based on uncorroborated workplace allegations. When Marcus discovers one of his employees has been keeping a notebook of Jassim’s day-to-day activities, he explains to his wife, “I have the Christian right working for me...it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to guess that they are pretty right-wing” (235). Marcus finds it particularly disturbing that “the FBI

could start an investigation based on the allegations of one woman who probably couldn't find Jordan on a map" (236). Jassim cannot imagine that this behavior would take place in the country in which he has lived for so many years: "Things like this aren't supposed to happen in America. Americans are pure, simple people, their culture governed by a few basic tenets, not complicated conspiracy theories" (299). However, Marcus learns of the notebook from another employee whom he also classifies as a member of the Christian right: "Anita came to me after they left. She was guilt-ridden, realized that she had behaved in an un-Christian manner. Said that Bella's been keeping tabs on Jassim, called the FBI on him at least twice" (236). While Halaby proposes that religious extremism and the violence that often results from it (whether state-sponsored or otherwise) occur as frequently in the U.S. as in the Middle East, she also suggests that the events that took place on 9/11 were not caused by religious zealotry; instead, they were reactions to the disparity between Western and Eastern cultures, between wealth and poverty. Halaby points out that terrorism is by no means unique to twenty-first century America. Rather, it has been occurring in other countries for decades and is a symptom of a longstanding global poverty crisis as opposed to a result of religious fanaticism.

Jassim and Salwa are wealthy in comparison to most other Americans, and are depicted as living in the hills, far away from the underclass that exists both literally and figuratively beneath them. As the novel progresses, though, Jassim comes to an understanding that poverty not only exists in America but is also a crisis invisible to many American citizens. Jassim travels to a part of the city he would not normally visit after he accidentally hits and kills a young skateboarder, Evan, with his Mercedes and drives to the boy's mother's house in order to offer consolation. Jassim is initially

shocked by the conditions he encounters in Evan's neighborhood, and he develops a need to learn about the world he has uncovered:

Daily he traveled ... greedy to see into lives he knew nothing about.

Somehow this aspect of American culture had escaped him. The more he drove ... the more fascinated he became, amazed at the years he had spent without ever really seeing. (275)

Jassim is amazed that a country with so much wealth, the kind of wealth to which he is accustomed, could allow such conditions to exist. For the first time, he sees "pickup trucks and pink fences, shaved heads and snotty-nosed children, food stamps, tattered smiles, ill-fitting false teeth, tobacco-stained fingers, and fourteen-hour-shift bloodshot eyes" (275). Later, while making a trip to Wal-Mart with Penny, he encounters a woman speaking Jordanian Arabic, and the pervasiveness of the global poverty crisis becomes apparent to him:

In one breath he was in the souq in Amman, a place he couldn't stand, for the same reason he wouldn't have liked Wal-Mart if he hadn't been invited to go with Penny: too many poor people, too many products to sift through, all of questionable quality. Too many people squish-squashing their overworked, coughing selves together. (278)

By allowing Jassim to run into a woman from his homeland while coming in contact with the American working class, Halaby juxtaposes the conditions under which the poor exist in Western and Eastern nations alike, and stresses the notion that a flow of culture across national boundaries is doing nothing to ease the plight of the poor. In doing so, Halaby also implies that the attacks on the World Trade Center—while misconstrued as wholly

resulting from Arab and Muslim extremism—were rather an indirect result of a growing, worldwide poverty epidemic. Extremism, then, is a symptom of poverty and both its results and cause are not confined to the Arab world.

Halaby also turns the lens through which Americans view Arab and Muslim nations back on U.S. culture when she depicts troubled American youths with little regard for life, transposing the expectation that Islam is the culture of death. Halaby portrays American adolescents buying and selling life-threatening drugs. Despite Evan's understanding of the dangers of drug use as well as the incarceration that could result from it, he becomes excited when purchasing illegal drugs: "his heart pounded more when he left the apartment than it had when he had got there. Exhilarating and terrifying all at once to walk out into the possibility of being arrested" (73). Halaby, then, associates the thrill of drug use—due in part to its grave consequences—with the mentality of suicide bombers, and thus she overturns the American impression of Arabic youth culture.

Moreover, when Jassim's car strikes Evan, Halaby suggests that the boy seems to intentionally turn his skateboard into Jassim's car: "he then pushed off and jumped, propelling himself straight into the front of Jassim's car. Jassim swerved left, felt a sickening *thunk*, and watched as the boy flipped over the hood" (117). When Jassim describes the event to the police, who eventually clear him of any wrong-doing, he indicates that the boy's movement toward the car seemed intentional: "the one boy just came out, but he looked at me first, like he planned to do it, or like he thought he would do something else, like jump over the car, only he ended up going right into it" (121). Halaby equates the fascination of American teenagers to participate in extreme sports

with potentially fatal outcomes to the fanaticism that breeds suicide bombers among Middle-Eastern youth.

Halaby also inverts the expectations of her readers when one of the police officers who arrives at the scene of Jassim's car accident, Officer Barkley, shows unanticipated sympathy toward a clearly shaken Jassim. Since the American characters in Halaby's novel either distrust Jassim and Salwa initially or later reveal feelings of anti-Arab racism, readers may expect Officer Barkley to accuse Jassim of intentional vehicular homicide, especially given images often shown in the visual media of race-based police brutality. Instead, Officer Barkley displays consideration for Jassim and turns out to be one of the few American characters in the novel who treat Jassim with a complete lack of prejudice.

Finally, Halaby also transposes the Western representation of Arab women by juxtaposing Jake's image of Salwa to Jassim's fascination with Penny. Jake exoticizes Salwa's Arab identity and seduces her by speaking to her in Arabic (127). Jake thinks of Salwa in the following manner:

... mature without seeming old. This mixed with her foreignness made her sophisticated. Exotic. And married. The challenge of this combination turned him on, and he wondered if all Arab women had this allure (the physical one and the shadow of a man behind them) and if that was why they veiled themselves. (171)

Because Salwa is treated badly by American customers at the bank where she works, she finds Jake's attention comforting. Similarly, Jassim finds himself the subject of an unwarranted investigation and is overcome with guilt and grief after the car accident; he

looks to Penny, a voluptuous American waitress working at Denny's, for consolation and becomes attracted to her:

He just wanted to be with Penny and her large breasts and her soothing easy smile and her lack of connection to his life. The further away he drove from Denny's, however, the more impossible the scenario seemed. At a stoplight, he pulled out the piece of paper on which she had written the phone number. "I can't do this," he said aloud in Arabic. "I could have then. Could have taken her away, somewhere private, and had American sex with her, fulfilled this need, but this takes too much thought." He got out his cell phone and dialed the number. (158)

As Penny represents a stereotypical image of American women, when Jassim exoticizes her, it becomes a reversal of the Western gaze upon Arab women, who are often portrayed as "belly-dancing harem girls" in Western culture (Naber "Arab Americans" 4). Furthermore, as Jassim and Salwa's personal lives begin to unwind after 9/11, they become oddly more connected with American characters who they initially view as accepting; in both instances, however, their impressions of sympathetic American characters are far too trusting. As mentioned earlier, Penny discloses her Islamophobic notions to her room-mate, and Jake reveals his true intolerant nature when Salwa visits his apartment to tell him she is moving back home to Jordan: "... you're running back to the pigsty you came from" (320). As Jake becomes enraged with Salwa because of her decision to return to Jordan, he bludgeons her repeatedly and screams, "Bitch! Goddamn fucking Arab bitch..." (322). Jassim and Salwa exoticize Penny and Jake respectively

out of an estrangement from the American culture they had once enjoyed. Steven Salaita discusses this notion in his text, *Modern Arab American Fiction*:

Jassim's innate attraction to Penny, then, arises from a certain feeling of alienation that he imagines Penny can satisfy. Penny's attraction to Jassim arises from the same hope, though she indicates that she is interested mainly in the lifestyle that Jassim's income might provide. (91)

When commenting on Salwa's attraction to Jake, Salaita notes, "Her ethnicity is built into Americans' perception of her, and any negative associations with that ethnicity come forward in unguarded moments" (91). In post 9/11 America, Jassim and Salwa find themselves the subjects of the Western gaze and isolated from the America to which they were once accustomed. These events are not coincidentally simultaneous; instead, they are directly related results of racism and classism. Jassim and Salwa respond by gazing back upon the West, at once disconnected from it and their hopes of achieving the American dream.

CHAPTER IV

FRACTURED FAIRY TALES

Since the title of Halaby's novel is reminiscent of the beginning of a traditional, Western fairy tale, Halaby again reverses reader's expectations at the conclusion of her novel, in which Salwa's circumstance—in a hospital bed after being subjected to Jake's brutal beating—leaves her far from living happily ever after. Halaby also blends her use of Western fairy tale traditions with Arabic folktale conventions. First of all, she prefaces her novel with "kan / ya ma kan / fee qadeem az-zamaan," a common opening to Arabic folktales similar to 'Once upon a time' and meaning "They say there was or there wasn't in olden times" (vii). Moreover, early in her novel, Halaby, through Salwa's grandmother, tells a traditional Palestinian children's tale entitled "Nus Nsays," which can be translated into English as "half of a halving" or "half-halvsies" (93; Halaby, Message to the author, 4 Oct., 2010). In the story, the tiny Nus Nsays outsmarts and captures the ghula—a character similar to a witch or a hag in Western fairy tales—through eventually resisting her offerings of "gold and silver and money" to which Nus Nsays responds, "I don't want gold or silver or money. I want peace for my village" (97). When a young Salwa asks her grandmother why Nus Nsays is so small, her

grandmother responds, “To show that with determination and a clever wit, small characters can defeat larger evils. Every Palestinian has a bit of Nus Nsays within him. Or her” (98). When Salwa asks her grandmother whom the ghula in the story represents, her grandmother does not offer an answer, although, as Halaby’s novel progresses, the correlation between the inner and outer story becomes clear: Nus Nsays may represent Salwa on behalf of the Arab American population as a whole, and the ghula embodies America itself and all its temptations of affluence.

Although Nus Nsays defeats the ghula in the embedded folktale, Salwa is beaten by American culture at the end of Halaby’s novel, suggesting that, for Salwa—and perhaps all Arab Americans—it may not be possible to exist peacefully in post 9/11 America. Furthermore, by juxtaposing Western and Arab mythology (both offering central characters who ultimately defeat the stories’ antagonists) with the plot of her own novel, Halaby makes the point that the American dream is unavailable to most American and third world citizens alike. She further points out that the pursuit of wealth and privilege by some makes peace impossible for most, and that while the overwhelming disparity between classes exists, peace will only occur in fairy tale endings.

Halaby concludes her novel with another embedded story. This time, though, rather than retelling a traditional tale, she blends Arab folklore with her own novel’s plot and characters. The second tale also begins with the translated Arabic phrase “They say there was or there wasn’t in olden times,” providing a bookend to the novel’s opening tale (331). The plot revolves around a young peasant girl (symbolizing Salwa) who was born in a land far from her ancestors, where “fathers—and often mothers too—labored so that their children could change their fates” (331). The ghula character reappears and, still

embodying America, she begins “pulling the girl away from her familiar world” while preparing to eventually eat her (332). The ghula’s hold on Salwa’s is a representation of Salwa’s fascination with consumerism:

The hairy hideous ghula saw the beauty in child’s face and grew madly jealous, wanted the baby for her own, but knew she wouldn’t get past security, so she took out her wild ghula threads and began to stitch them under the baby’s skin ... [w]hen the ghula was done, the baby lay asleep with a thousand and one red threads hanging from her. ... [w]hen the ghula thought the girl would be grown and ripe for eating, she began to reel in the remaining threads, pulling the girl away from her familiar world, gently turning the skein a bit more each day. (331-332)

Two other characters—Clever Hassan and a nightingale—both occurring frequently in Arabic folktales, attempt to save the peasant girl from the ghula. While at some points in the story it is somewhat unclear as to whom these characters represent, it eventually becomes apparent that the nightingale is indeed Jassim, “lift[ing] up the unconscious and damaged maiden and carr[ying] her home across land and sea, hoping that with the proper care she would recover from her wounds” (335). The ambiguity of the characters’ counterparts in the narrative seems no accident. First of all, throughout much of the novel itself, Salwa’s marriage is unraveling while she is also pursued by both Jake and her former boyfriend, Hassan. Also, the vague representations may symbolize Halaby’s theme of blurred national boundaries that runs throughout her novel.

The second inner tale suggests what the outer story does not: Jassim ultimately decides to take Salwa back to her homeland. Although this inclusion might suggest the

ending still has some hope for the protagonists, Carol Fadda-Conrey, in her article “Arab American Citizenship in Crisis: Destabilizing Representations of Arabs and Muslims in the US After 9/11,” points out, “Although [Salwa’s] actual return to Jordan is alluded to rather than included in the narrative, this promised final return takes on an ominous form, pointing to her shame and her failure in the Promised Land, which in turn comes to fully exhibit its less-than-promising dimensions” (546-547). The second tale ends with the storyteller explaining that “it was and wasn’t” an American fairy tale (335). By combining Arab folk tales with her narrative of an Arab American couple struggling in post 9/11 America, Halaby suggests that Western and Eastern stories can exist peacefully when kept separate. When blended, however, the characters expose America as a “hairy hideous ghula” and are physically and emotionally scarred by their decision to pursue her temptations (331). While it may be possible to keep stories separated, in today’s global community such separation is impossible.

CHAPTER V

WORLDS APART: TRACES OF SILKO IN

ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND

Halaby's blending of Arabic folktales with her narrative is evocative of techniques Leslie Marmon Silko uses in her novel, *Ceremony*. Folktales are as influential to Arabic literature as storytelling is to contemporary Native American texts. Silko combines images and characters from traditional Native American folklore with her own plot, and in doing so, emphasizes a connection between past and present and her implication that Native Americans can retain their culture in a contemporary timeframe by developing an awareness that they cannot remain separate from white culture.

In *Ceremony*, Silko intricately weaves the theme of a world interconnected through drought, unremitting warfare, and the possibility of nuclear annihilation throughout her novel. In doing so, she issues a warning to humanity to regard the planet as a global village rather than as a multitude of disconnected nations and detached cultures. In of the poems interspersed throughout the text, Silko suggests that Native Americans should not separate themselves from white culture because both Native

Americans and whites alike could potentially suffer the same fate in the form of a nuclear holocaust:

They will take this world from ocean to ocean / they will turn on each other / they will destroy each other / Up here / in these hills / they will find the rocks, / rocks with veins of green and yellow and black. / They will lay the final pattern with these rocks / they will lay it across the world / and explode everything. (137)

Through her imagery of “veins of green and yellow and black” in the rocks, Silko is referencing the uranium mining that occurred on the Laguna reservation in New Mexico, where her story is primarily set. Halaby revisits Silko’s vision of a united Native American and white society when she offers images of poverty, drought, violence and despair occurring in both Eastern and Western nations alike.

Just as Halaby portrays Americans with an inability to view themselves as global citizens, many of Silko’s Native American characters refuse to connect with white society, in spite of the fact that, as Silko proposes, globalization offers them with no other solution. Ku’oosh, on the other hand, causes Silko’s central character, Tayo, to become cognizant of a precariously interconnected world:

The old man only made him certain of something he had feared all along, something in the old stories. It took only one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of sun into the sand, and the fragile world would be injured. (38)

Both Silko and Halaby stress that all cultures must come to an understanding that they are united in a common fate that could take the shape of a variety of global disasters. Both

authors, then, put forward that it is crucial for all civilizations to transcend borders and a persistent polarizing mindset.

In another poem, Silko shifts her focus from nuclear disaster to drought. She tells the story of Reed Woman and her sister, Corn Woman. Corn Woman admonishes her sister for wasting water by bathing all day, and shortly afterwards, the rain stops falling:

And there was no more rain then. / Everything dried up / all the plants /
the corn / the beans / they all dried up / and started blowing away / in the
wind. / The people and animals / were thirsty. / They were starving. (13-
14)

Halaby tells a similar story regarding Jassim and his family. After his Uncle Abu Jalal educates young Jassim on the importance of water, Jassim obsessively reprimands his mother and sisters:

Whether by God or destiny or chance, Abu Jalal's words of that summer
afternoon seeped into Jassim's subconscious, dripped into his daily
thoughts. They doubled in size and power, became a tsunami that
possessed him at times, drove him to scream at his sisters if they let the
water run while they were scrubbing the dishes, or at his mother, who
tended to over-water the garden. (41)

In fact, the global shortage of fresh water informs much of Halaby's novel. Halaby makes it clear that lack of fresh water concerns both Eastern and Western nations alike, and suggests that the United States must discontinue its practice of engaging in discourses that separate East from West in order to address the problem of drought, a problem that is

as real in American states—particularly the Southwest—as it is in Africa, India, and the Middle East.

Halaby addresses the global water shortage by saturating her novel with water imagery. For example, she describes Salwa and Jassim’s relationship as being “parched around the edges,” and when Jassim remembers his uncle, Abu Jalal, his words “seep into Jassim’s subconscious, drip into his daily thoughts” (vii, 41). In more concrete terms, Jassim is frequently depicted taking a shower, swimming at his local fitness club, and drinking water:

Today, in the quietness of the afternoon, in the coolness of his house, Jassim removed a gleaming glass from a glossy maple cabinet and filled it with the purest spring water money could buy, delivered biweekly up the hills by a gigantic complaining truck he never saw. He drank the first glassful in one slow gulp and filled it again, now turning his attention to the mail. (24)

What is more, Jassim is a hydrologist, and is almost obsessive in his work to make fresh water readily available to people of all nations. Furthermore, it is appropriate to this predominating theme in the novel that Jassim and Salwa live in Tucson, Arizona, a location that is as arid as anywhere in the Middle East. By placing her central characters in this setting, Halaby engages in yet another reversal of the Western perception of Middle-Eastern countries and, in doing so, makes it apparent that the water shortage concerns all nations. She also drives her point home that the propensity of Americans to view the world as “developed” versus “undeveloped” will only intensify the problem of drought.

Jassim's desire to bring drought to an end is inspired at a young age, during an afternoon he spends on his uncle's land in Jordan. During a conversation that takes place on Abu Jalal's porch, Abu Jalal reveals to Jassim the importance of water preservation for all nations:

All these fools, so worked up over land and rights and they don't see the greater picture. Water is what will decide things, not just for us but for every citizen of the world as well. If we humans were smart, if we were truly as evolved as they say we are, we would all work together to figure out how to turn salt water into drinkable water, how to use water wisely, preserve the water that falls each year ... Mark my words: shortage of water is what will doom the occupants of this earth, and they are fools not to know that. (40-41)

Through Abu Jalal's life-changing lecture to Jassim, Halaby asserts that shortage of water is a crisis that must be seen on global terms, as one that affects all nations, in order for it to be solved. As Jassim matures, he admonishes his family for letting water run unnecessarily and wasting water on flowers rather than food in the garden. His passion for water intensifies after his uncle finds water on his seemingly dry land, and Jassim's destiny as a hydrologist is solidified.

Many years later, Jassim delivers a lecture on water preservation in Jordan. It is this lecture that exemplifies Halaby's point that nations must transcend borders in order to solve global crises. Jassim passionately presents facts and figures to the attendees of his lecture: "There are estimates that some eighty countries, with forty percent of the world's population, are suffering from serious water shortages. In another twenty-five

years, two thirds of the entire population of this globe will be living in water-stressed areas” (244). As Halaby portrays Jassim closing his lecture, she suggests that the pervasiveness of American materialism overshadows urgent situations that affect the entire planet:

I will leave you with this thought. Suppose you are flying in a tiny plane and it crashes in the desert. You are reduced to your most basic existence. It doesn't matter if you have a nice car or suit or watch. You are alone in the desert, and there is only one thing that will keep you alive. Not land. Not oil. Water. (246)

Not only does Halaby make it clear that the fate of the world lies in an ability to make fresh water accessible to all people of all countries, she also mentions that consumerism (a “nice car or suit or watch”) is relatively insignificant, yet it holds such a dominant space in contemporary American culture, both particularly and ironically to whom Jassim becomes later in the novel.

CHAPTER VI

GLOBALIZATION, TRANSNATIONAL CRISES, AND THE
U.S. MAINSTREAM MEDIA

While it would seem the United States is in need of engineers like Jassim, in spite of his vital work as a hydrologist, he is eventually forced to leave the country he wanted to help. Through this plot development, Halaby again makes her point that U.S. citizens, politicians, and media outlets fail to understand that drought and poverty occur in Western as well as Eastern nations. Furthermore, affluent countries often react to these epidemics counterproductively or shortsightedly, rather than offering proactive, effective solutions. Gikandi touches on the incompetence of Western foreign policy as well as the ineptitude of the U.S. media when he points to the dualistic nature of globalization, exposing both its positive and negative elements. According to Gikandi, although globalization has brought about a flow of cultural ideas and images between Western and Eastern nations, it has done little or nothing to alleviate the poverty and famine that occur across the globe:

[W]hile we live in a world defined by cultural and economic flows across formally entrenched national boundaries, the world continues to be divided, in stark terms, between its ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ sectors. It is precisely because of the starkness of this division that the discourse of globalization seems to be perpetually caught between two competing narratives, one of celebration, the other of crisis. (609)

Halaby herself calls to mind the theories of Gikandi when, at several points in her novel, she implies that globalization has failed to assuage the desperation that persists beyond, and sometimes within, Western borders. This is evident when Salwa relays a portion of Jassim’s lecture to her former boyfriend, Hassan:

Did you know that the U.S. sanctions in Iraq have directly resulted in malnutrition among children and the resurgence of diseases that were thought to be almost entirely eradicated? How ironic it is that the most advanced country in the world is sending everyone else back in time, so that they are ravaged by diseases that had been wiped out. (249)

The malnutrition and disease that directly resulted from the sanctions in Iraq were rarely reported in the U.S. mainstream media. Halaby alludes to the limitations of the corporate media when she portrays Marcus telling Jassim about Amy Goodman, the host of *Democracy Now!*—an independent radio and television news broadcast, in order to obtain information not available in the mainstream media:

Hey Jassim, do you ever listen to Amy Goodman? ... She talks about what is really happening in this country, about the scores of Arabs and Pakistanis and other Muslims who have been arrested on baseless

allegations, who are being held who knows where and are not allowed contact with their families, and how they may be deported because of visa violations. Jassim, she is the reason I'm telling you about the FBI. She has made me realize the extent our government will go to for the sake of justifying what they see as revenge. (226)

The harmful effects of globalization receive similar treatment in corporate U.S. media outlets that, despite their often 24-hour coverage, do not allow for a closer understanding of other cultures due to the influence of moneyed interests. For example, when Salwa attempts to find a radio station without commercials, she instead tunes in to a disturbing radio broadcast:

A man's voice blared out: "Is anyone fed up yet? Is anyone sick of nothing being done about all those Arab terrorists? In the name of Jesus Christ! They live with us. Among us! Mahzlims who are just waiting to attack us." (56)

The inability of the mainstream media in contemporary American society to report on issues dire consequence to non-Western cultures brings to mind Gikandi's notion of the "*other* side of globalization" which occurs in conjunction with the fact that globalization "seems to harmonize the universal and the particular and, in the process, it seems to open up to a multiplicity of cultural relationships unheard of in the age of empire" (610). Gikandi recounts the story of two Ginnean boys who become stowaways on a plane bound for Brussels in hope of escaping poverty and war. The boys are found dead in the cargo hold, along with a letter containing the following excerpt:

We beseech you on behalf of your love for your continent, your people, your families, and above all your children, whom you cherish more than life itself. And for the love of God, who has granted you all the experience, wealth, and power to ably construct and organize your continent. We call upon your graciousness and solidarity to help us in Africa. Our problems are many: war, sickness, hunger, lack of education ... [a]nd if you find that we have sacrificed our lives, it is because we suffer too much in Africa. (610)

Gikandi explains that the boys were not seeking cultural hybridity; instead, they were looking for relief from extreme poverty and war. He also proposes that a focus on the global flow of cultural images detracts from the “material experiences of everyday life and survival” (611).

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Eleven years after the events of September 11, 2001, occurred, Halaby's novel remains as relevant as it did when initially published in 2007. The significance is due not only to Halaby's decision not to shy away from broaching controversial topics, but also to the relentlessness of American paranoia and prejudice.

Halaby's novel stands apart from works of fiction written by Arab American authors directly following 9/11 due to her skillful connection of the attacks to a theme of persistent global crises through the war on terror and discourse surrounding it. The works of earlier Arab American novelists and poets often reflect a September 12, 2001, moment: reactive, yet understandably so. Halaby's indictment of American society, however, seems to stand the test of time. For example, the reaction to the so-called "ground-zero mosque" stands as a testament to the fact that many Americans still perceive all Arabs and Muslims as "the enemy." Moreover, the lingering belief that President Barack Obama is a practicing member of the Muslim faith only reiterates the pervasive misunderstanding and fear of Islam within U.S. borders. Pastor Terry Jones's intent to burn the Koran on the anniversary of 9/11 and the recent Koran burning carried

out by U.S. troops in Afghanistan serve as further proof of American Islamophobia. The tendency of some Americans to fear all Middle Eastern peoples due to the acts of a few extremists (most recently, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called underwear bomber) proves that the American misplaced reaction to terrorism is not likely to change in the immediate future.

Further evidence of the lack of change in American sentiment toward Arab Americans lies in the publishing of the paperback edition (2009) of Halaby's novel, which elides a controversial opening scene. The hardcover edition begins with a scene in a U.S. airport, where an Arab American passenger is singled out and questioned. The airport security guard asks the passenger to place personal possessions in a bin. Rather than responding to the security guard's instructions and questions, the passenger takes on the role of a narrator, asking readers of the story that is about to follow to place preconceptions into a small box:

And for good measure, why don't you throw in those hateful names as well, ones you might never even utter: Sand Nigger, Rag Head, and Camel Jockey. You don't need them for this story, and you might find they get in the way, like a small child who's just had a candy bar and a can of soda and has to attend a funeral ... I don't need to lock the box, for it has a power of its own and will stay closed for the duration of our story.

Do you feel lighter now, relieved of your excess baggage? (IX)

The narrator functions as the novel's security guard, asking readers to place any stereotypes into the box before their journey. Through this twist, Halaby deploys yet another reversal and sets the tone for the rest of her narrative.

According to Halaby, although she was fond of the scene (referring to it as “one of my favorite passages in the book”), her editor suggested deleting the scene because “people might get turned off by it” (Halaby, Message to the author, 7 Jul. 2009). Given the fact that Halaby’s novel is intended to be eye opening and provocative, it may seem ironic that controversial material was omitted; however, her narrative is actually the perfect venue for such a deletion to occur. The fact that Halaby’s editor viewed the novel as, in places, too contentious for the general American public eight years after the 9/11 attacks took place reiterates the inertia of American public opinion.

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