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From the Beqaa Valley to Deep Valley: Arab American Childhood & US Orientalism in Children's Literature

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In Maud Hart Lovelace's children's book, *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill*, three little white girls named Betsy, Tacy, and Tib defend their new Syrian friend from schoolyard bullies. Tib's mother tells them, "Foreign people should not be treated like that. America is made up of foreign people. Both of Tib's grandmothers came from the other side. Perhaps when they got off the boat they looked a little strange too" (75). The book establishes the Syrian girl's foreignness and strangeness forthwith, while defending her as being in the natal stages of Americanization. Lovelace writes about her early twentieth century childhood in the United States, responding to xenophobic narratives of Arabs in the United States by writing sympathetic stories about Arab American children. Her books critique the dehumanizing rhetoric of the early twentieth century United States through the actions of her young characters. Yet, as Tib's mother's defense of the little Syrian girl demonstrates, Lovelace is unable to fully extricate her humanizing tales from prevalent Orientalist tropes or from making moral claims based on potential assimilation.

I argue that Lovelace's writing depicts three intersecting paradigms for Arab Americans in the early twentieth century: US Orientalism, assimilation into legal and cultural whiteness, and cultural pluralism. Edward Said defines Orientalism as the "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it; in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). Orientalism is the framework I use for reading Lovelace's fictionalization of her early life. Her exoticization and defense of her Syrian characters is influenced by the long history of denigration and romanticization that shapes the experiences of Arabs in the United States.

The Syrian characters are also defined by the racialization of Arabs in the US as socially nonwhite and legally white, their racial makeup continually determined through and against Blackness. Steven Salaita writes that “Arab Americans have never been privy to a fixed legal identity in our history in the United States, neither have we been assigned a trenchant position within American racial hierarchies” (22). Indeed, even early in US history, lawmakers were trying to figure out how to categorize Arab Americans. For example, in the late eighteenth century, the South Carolina House of Representatives decided that Moroccan Arabs living in the state should be treated according to the laws for whites, not the laws for Black people who were also from Africa.¹ The 1909 Supreme Court case *George Dow v. the United States* determined that Syrians should be defined as white in terms of citizenship, and thus able to be naturalized according to the Naturalization Act of 1790. Despite legal whiteness that permitted naturalization as citizens, Arabs are racially coded as nonwhite and experience racism, evidenced in Lovelace’s books by descriptions of their brown skin and through bullying and exclusion.

I begin by giving an overview of the historical contexts of the books before moving on to my analysis of the texts themselves. I am specifically writing about mid-century representations of early Arab American childhood by a white author, but I end by including books about Muslim American childhood more broadly for two related reasons. First, Lovelace’s books establish the potential Americanness of her protagonists by emphasizing their Christianity in contrast to Islam, which is the same legal reasoning given by George Dow’s lawyers defining his whiteness. It is also the same rhetoric behind US states enacting sharia bans and exclusions of Muslim Americans from full political and public life today. Second, in the US, Arab and Muslim are routinely conflated in political rhetoric and popular media, and Islam has been racialized, most

¹ Moors Sundry Act of 1790.

often as Arab, particularly in the period following the 1948 war, exacerbated by the Gulf Wars, and 9/11 and its resulting surveillance polices, invasions, and occupations, as well as through pervasive dominant stereotypes that homogenize the regions of the Middle East, Central Asia, West Asia, and North Africa as culturally and ethnically monolithic. Lovelace's books partake in US Orientalism, but they also underscore the long history of Arab Americans in the US, one too often completely obscured by a post-9/11 narrative that Arab and Muslim immigration is relatively new and always threatening.

Historical and Literary Contexts

Maud Hart Lovelace was born on April 25, 1892 in Mankato, Minnesota. Two of her children's book series, the *Betsy-Tacy* books and the *Deep Valley* books, describe growing up in early twentieth century Deep Valley, a fictionalized version of Mankato. The character of Betsy Ray is based on herself, and the other characters are based on her friends and family. The *Betsy-Tacy* books begin in 1897, and the third installment, *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill*, takes place in 1902, when the girls are ten years old. The following installments take place each subsequent year. I look specifically at Lovelace's *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill* (1942); *Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown* (1943); *Betsy in Spite of Herself* (1946); and *Emily of Deep Valley* (1950), which takes place in 1912-13.

The Arabs and Arab Americans represented in Lovelace's books migrated during the period between 1880 and 1924, when more than 20 million immigrants entered the United States, and an estimated 1-2 million Arabs came from Greater Syria to the Americas. While not exclusively, the majority of these Arab immigrants were Lebanese/Syrian Christians. They settled in urban centers such as New York, Boston, and Detroit, where textile, peddling, and

automotive industries promised employment, as well as across the Midwest, including the small town of Mankato, which had a neighborhood locals called Little Syria. Little Syrias dotted the rural Midwest. Lovelace's use of Syrian to describe her characters reflects the nomenclature of her youth in Mankato; indeed in the foreword to Lovelace's 1951 children's book about Maronites in Brooklyn, *The Trees Kneel at Christmas*, her daughter, Merian Lovelace Kirchner, describes why the publishers changed Syrian to Lebanese for its 1994 edition: "But since then, we have all come to know only too well that Lebanon and Syria are different countries, and I'm certain my mother would want to leave no doubt that the Shehadis are Lebanese-American" (viii). While I refer to Syrian characters in this article, the area from which their real-life counterparts migrated is now Lebanon, and characters mention migrating from Lebanon in *Betsy-Tacy*.

Published accounts of the lives of these early migrants are rare, although the Arab American National Museum archives include correspondence, photographs, and oral histories.² Arab American literature was not widely published until the 1920s, with the advent of the New York Pen League and including authors such as Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani. By the time Lovelace's books were published, the Immigration Act of 1924 had drastically limited immigration from these regions, and Arab American literary production lulled but did not disappear. Mid-century Arab American literature includes such works as Silom Rizk's 1943 memoir, *Syrian Yankee*; William Blatty's 1960 memoir, *Which Way to Mecca, Jack*; and George Hamid's 1956 memoir, *Boy Acrobat*. All three authors wrote about their childhoods, leaning heavily into self-Orientalizing and self-deprecating tropes, a defining feature of this era of Arab American writing.

² The Arab American National Museum Evelyn Shakir Collection; Joseph Nusser Family Collection; and the Family History Archive: Syrian and Lebanese Families in the American South.

While literary representations of early twentieth century Arab American *childhood* are rare, representations of *Arabs* in children's literature are not. Children's books in the nineteenth and early twentieth century featured renditions of tales from *1001 Nights* that contemporary audiences are still familiar with, including Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Sinbad the Sailor, and, of course, Aladdin and his lamp. Romance, with its Orientalist aesthetics and fantasies, was a popular colonial form of narrative about the Middle East, along with Holy Land travelogues and tales of Barbary pirates, showing up in works by authors such as Washington Irving and Mark Twain, as well as Orientalist romances serialized in popular magazines. These romance and travel tropes persist throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in popular fiction and films.³ Jacob Rama Berman writes of how the “figurative Arabs that appear on the pages of nineteenth-century American texts replace real Arabs in the American cultural imaginary and exert a representational pressure on the literal ‘Arabs’ who eventually appear on American shores at the end of the nineteenth century” (17). Children's literature plays a role in this history of Western representations and appropriations, and Lovelace's depictions of the “literal” Arabs that Berman describes are impacted by the figurative Arabs of the American cultural imaginary that precede them.

Moreover, there are two contexts from which Lovelace's books emerge: the historical milieu they describe, and the period in which they were published. The most obvious parallel is Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series (1932-1943) in which Mankato is the big town where Charles Ingalls did business. But the mid-twentieth century also saw the publication of C.S. Lewis' Narnia series, in which Calormens wear turbans and pointed shoes and are vaguely Middle Eastern and, critics argue, represent Islam. They also coincide with the publication of

³ See Amira Jarmakani, *An Imperialist Love Story: Desert Romances and the War on Terror* (NYU Press, 2015) and Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People* (Olive Branch, 2014).

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* which include the vaguely dark and Middle Eastern Haradrim (which is visually emphasized in the early 2000s *Lord of the Rings* film series, in which the Haradrim are swathed in black turbans). Mid-twentieth century comic books from Donald Duck to Superman feature Arabs and Muslims as villains. Jack Shaheen noted in his survey of Arab representation in comic books that of 218 Arab "types" appearing in 215 comic books ranging from the mid-twentieth century to the late 1980s, 149 were evil, with 69 being ordinary but passive characters ("Jack Shaheen Versus" 10). Likewise, in his book, *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen catalogues racist and dehumanizing representations of Arabs and Muslims in over 900 Hollywood films, beginning with the nascent film industry which established the norm of portraying Arab men as villainous sheiks, desert nomads, and terrorists, and Arab women as both licentious and imprisoned in harems.

A Little Girl So Strange

In *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill*, when Besty, Tacy, and Tib first encounter the Syrian child Naifi, she is "a little girl so strange that she seemed to have stepped out of one of Betsy's stories" (49). She is racialized as nonwhite in the book, "From a rosy-brown face very bright brown eyes darted from Tip to Betsy to Tacy," as is her grandmother who is a "tiny old lady with a brown withered face like a nut," and her father, who has a "dark merry face" and is described by Betsy's father as "an ancient prince of a very ancient race" (49, 119, 116, 148). The book is rife with familiar Orientalist imagery. Arabic is repeatedly described as "loud harsh talk" (150), and the grandfather wears a "red be-tasseled cap" and smokes a "hubble-bubble pipe" (119). Orientalist imagery shows up again in *Betsy In Spite of Herself*, when Betsy goes with her family to the Moorish Café which her father describes as having "Oriental decorations, lights so

low you can hardly see your nose, an orchestra making hoochy koochy music” (57). The description of the café itself is one exotic cliché after another, as it is “mysteriously dim” with “seductive” music and “small brass lamps studded with red and green and purple glass” (63). Betsy’s eyes grow “accustomed to this colored dark,” and she sees “rich rugs and hangings, a turbaned orchestra” (63).

Naifi and her family’s racialized exoticism is juxtaposed with their frequently expressed desire to become American. After sharing their picnic with Naifi, Tacy says “She must have just come to America....The other Syrians all know a little English and they don’t dress like that” (56). Later in the chapter “Little Syria,” Naifi has begun to assimilate: “she wore quite an ordinary short dress like their own and ordinary shoes and stockings,” and her father states proudly, “She is now a little American girl” (117). Her embroidered skirt and earrings were decidedly not American, and now she wears what the girls consider normal clothing. Naifi’s father says that his own father was an emeer of Lebanon but insists that “he is also an American. He is trying to get the citizenship and so am I. And that will be a greater honor, to be Americans” (153). Becoming fully American through citizenship and integration is the highest good, as Besty’s sister remarks, “They think a lot of being Americans; don’t they?” (156).

The same Orientalist images show up in *Emily of Deep Valley*: tasseled red caps, hookah pipes, sitting on floors instead of chairs, foreign foods, and so forth, as well as a similar emphasis on assimilation. When a little boy Kalil is being bullied, Emily starts a Boy’s Club, at which the two Syrian boys receive “American” names. She thinks to herself, “People looked down on the Syrians – because they were poor, or because they spoke broken English, or because they lived by themselves and kept their foreign customs,” and she resolves to convince “Americans” to join the club to combat this prejudice (198). In order to do so, she must “muster all the reasons why

Syrian and American children ought to be friends,” including their Christianity, desire for religious freedom, and niceness (199). She even endeavors to school Syrian boys on their backwards sexism when they object to their sister joining the club, saying, “In America, Kalil, girls are important” (196). When she decides to include Syrian women in her English classes, she thinks, “They had been liked caged birds” (230). Emily’s efforts free them, replicating the ubiquitous Orientalist trope of the oppressed Arab woman who finds new freedoms in the more progressively minded United States, facilitated by a white woman.

In the beginning of *Emily of Deep Valley*, Emily gives her high school commencement presentation on Jane Addams’ work with the Chicago settlement movement for recent European immigrants, and in the book Emily begins similar Americanization classes for Syrians. By the end of the novel, Emily is strategizing to help the Syrians “in getting their Americanization papers” (235). At a school board meeting at which Emily is proposing that Deep Valley petition for federal funds to support Americanization classes, the school board member, Mr. Whitlock declares: “I believe in America for the Americans . . . I believe that immigration should be restricted” (256). When Emily makes a rousing speech for the board, she tells stories about the hospitality she received, elaborates on Syrian Christmas rituals, and ends by saying “I can only talk about what we ought to let them do for us: share their gaiety and warmth and generosity and kindness with the rest of Deep Valley” (258). Emily’s appeal for cultural pluralism, however, is tempered by her call for Americanization classes that during the period were linked to creating a compliant immigrant labor force.

In both *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill* and *Emily of Deep Valley*, the Syrians are compared to “our Pilgrim fathers” seeking their religious freedoms (147, 199). In *Emily of Deep Valley*, Grandpa Webster declares: “They’re Christians, the ones who live in Deep Valley, and

Syria is mostly Moslem, I guess” (199). In *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill*, Betsy’s father says:

You can read about their country in the Bible. The Deep Valley Syrians are Christians, but most Syrians are Mohammedans. Syria is under the control of the Turks, and the Turks are Mohammedans too. A good many of the Christian Syrians are coming to America these days. And they come for much the same reason that our Pilgrim fathers came. They want to be free from oppression and religious persecution. (147)

At the end of the book, the girls crown Naifi an “American queen” in a ceremony with American flags, a recitation of the Gettysburg Address, and a rousing rendition of the Star Spangled Banner (165). During the ceremony, Betsy thinks fondly of Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt.

Claudia Mills reads this moment as indicating that “Lovelace understands Americanization, at least overtly, as involving commitment to American ideals and political principles rather than conformity to Anglo American cultural norms, so that, at least in theory, Deep Valley’s ‘foreigners’ can be welcomed and celebrated as true Americans” (85). She goes on to argue that, “At the same time, however, the political and the cultural are shown to be so intertwined that ‘foreigners’ must end up sacrificing at least some of their cultural difference in order to belong fully as citizens of Deep Valley” (85). The books’ examples of conformity to cultural norms — of changing dress and names, Americanization classes, comparisons to Pilgrims — complicate the claim that principles supersede culture, as does the reassurance that Syrians, as Christians in opposition to and in flight from Muslims, can be incorporated into the Christian, American fold.

Lovelace replicates notions of Arab Americans as white-adjacent, posturing to a nascent American “goodness” that in the larger context of the entire *Betsy-Tacy* series, takes place through juxtaposition with blackface. In *Betsy and Tacy Go Downtown*, Betsy goes to see *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the Mankato Opera House, which begins when a “black-faced quartette sang plantation melodies, told jokes, and cakewalked” (64). It is evident that the actors wear blackface, as after they leave the theater, “many showed traces of burned cork” (67). The girls are deeply moved by the death of the angelic Little Eva: “Tacy’s weeping almost shook the box. Betsy joined her tears to Tacy’s, and Tib put her head into Betsy’s lap to cry” (64). In contrast to *Betsy and Tacy Go Over the Big Hill*, where the girls bravely defend Naifi from bullying and enthusiastically learn about kibbee (a lamb dish) and the munjaira (flute), the girls express no opinion about the content of the play other than overwrought weeping at its pathos. They are more interested in following the pale, fragile actress who plays Little Eva to her hotel. The girls decide to put on their own play, and Tib offers to dance like the character Topsy, saying, “I could black my face and dance” (46). Whereas the Syrian characters elicit sympathy and friendship, the play represents a racist spectacle featuring the central tropes of minstrelsy, including the cakewalk and plantation songs.

Eric Lott calls minstrelsy “one of our earliest culture industries” which “reveals popular culture to be a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified – and contested” (8). Furthermore, it is “cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices” (7). The girls’ attendance at the play demonstrates the particular articulation of racial difference and commodification that blackface entails and which is not evident in the stories about Naifi or Kalil. The stories also take place against the well-known but unmentioned context

of the largest mass execution in United States history of 38 Dakota people on December 26, 1862 in Mankato, and the subsequent expulsion of the Dakota from the state.⁴ Traditions of Orientalist representations in performances, as well as in children's materials, are the context for reading Lovelace, but they also intersect with contemporaneous rhetoric of *acceptable* cultural pluralism and racial assimilation, which are neither Black nor Native.

Deep Valley & Arab American Childhood Today

The *Betsy-Tacy* and *Deep Valley* series celebrate female friendship and, in many episodes, defy gendered expectations for their characters and depict warm friendships with Arab immigrants. Both series were widely popular: the first edition of *Betsy Tacy* had thirty printings in hardcover, was in print until the 1980s, and was reissued by HarperCollins in 1992. They remain in print and continue to endear themselves to readers. They have a rich fandom, even getting a mention in the 1998 romantic comedy *You've Got Mail* and a *Wall Street Journal* write-up by *Princess Diaries* author, Meg Cabot. The Betsy-Tacy Society has preserved the houses of Lovelace and Frances Kenney (Tacy) as museums.⁵ The Society hosts an annual celebration of Lovelace's birthday as well as the summertime Deep Valley Days, during which visitors take horse-drawn carriage tours of Mankato and visit sites that appear in the books. The Society produces a newsletter and has a pen pal program for children. In addition to the annual birthday celebration, it hosts Victorian Christmas and Valentine's Day, as well as workshops, book

⁴ Howard J. Vogel writes: "In the aftermath of the Dakota-U.S. War of 1862, a demand arose in Minnesota for 'extermination or removal' of all Dakota people from the state. Congress responded by passing an Act on February 16, 1863 that unilaterally 'abrogated and annulled' all of the treaties with the four bands of Indigenous people known as the Dakota Oyate (Nation). But Congress was not content with simply abrogating the treaties. This Act of Congress also included provisions that purported to seize the Dakota homeland. Furthermore, in a companion Act passed fifteen days later, on March 3, 1863, Congress laid down the groundwork for the forced removal of all Dakota people to an unspecified reservation located beyond the boundaries of any state in the union" (538).

⁵ In 2010 the homes were declared National Literary Landmarks by the Association of Library Trustees, Advocates, Friends and Foundations, a division of the American Library Association.

festivals, panels, concerts, and fundraisers, including offering CD recordings of songs from the Betsy-Tacy books and limited edition Deep Valley wines from a local winery.

Even as the books encourage empathy with their Syrian characters, the descriptions of Syrians, from Naifi to the Moorish Café, misrepresent and appropriate Arabs in stereotypical ways. Both *Betsy and Tacy Goes Over the Big Hill* and *Emily of Deep Valley* trade in white savior narratives: Betsy, Tacy, Tib, and Emily uplift the Syrian children they encounter out of the goodness of their hearts. The books embody a savior mindset, endorsing the belief that through the efforts of individual open-minded white people, immigrant children will achieve a degree of Americanness and therefore upward social mobility. Solutions are based in individual acts of heroism and not collective empowerment of the Syrians. The books' framing allows a white readership to consume stories about white generosity extended to Syrian immigrants without feeling complicit in the racism the characters endure.

Emily of Deep Valley explicitly criticizes the treatment of their Syrian neighbors, when Emily says, "Deep Valley is, we are all aware, a beautiful town and a very fine town for most of us to live in. But it hasn't treated the Syrians well. It's never taken the trouble to get acquainted with them. So I would like very much to tell you a little about them" (257). Emily goes on to tell stories of Kalil and the hospitality she received in Syrian homes, of choosing "American" names, and of their "loving gratitude" for English classes she conducted in "her own living room" (258). Emily criticizes the town for rejecting the Syrian refugees and convinces the townspeople of their worth by telling stories for them. The experiences of Syrian immigrants are filtered through Emily who rescues them, just as Betsy and friends rescue Naifi from bullies and crown her an American Queen. These scenes demonstrate how white savior narratives and tales of white women and girl's empowerment and agency often work in tandem: Emily organizes

Americanization classes and bravely speaks to the board, and Betsy, Tacy, and Tib join together to stand up to the boys bullying their friend.

In spite of this, the books are widely touted as being exemplary of tolerance and bridge-building, and a lesson in how Americans should approach immigration with specific regard to Syrian refugees.⁶ In order to counteract ongoing political backlash against Syrian refugees in the US, the 2016 Deep Valley Homecoming presented “living history” actors recounting stories about Little Syria. This use of Lovelace’s books isn’t limited to regional events and blogs. In an article for *The New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino juxtaposes the sentiments of *Emily of Deep Valley* with rhetoric and policies about Syrian immigration under the Trump administration, writing that Emily’s personal growth and discovery of the “benefits of a diverse community” feels both “old-fashioned and progressive.” My aim is not to discount either the sentiment of the books or the contemporary use of them to support Syrian refugees. Rather, in this concluding section, I situate these conversations into larger debates about representations of Arab and Muslim Americans so that readers and educators can better navigate discourses of tolerance and assimilation in children’s literature that are harmful to Muslim and Arab Americans.

Post 9/11 has seen an increase in sympathetic portrayals of Muslim and Arab Americans – including interviews with Muslim and Arab Americans about their perspective on terrorist attacks and experiences with hate crimes. Given the increase in hate crimes and policies that

⁶ For examples, see Dallas Bradel’s “Betsy and Tacy and Tib and the Syrians,” *Girls Making History* (September 9, 2016) <http://www.girlsmakinghistory.com/blog/2016/9/9/betsy-and-tacy-and-tiband-the-syrians>; Amy Peterson’s “Loving Our Syrian Neighbors: What We Can Learn from the Betsy-Tacy Books,” *Christ Pop Culture* (November 18, 2015) <https://christandpopculture.com/loving-our-syrian-neighbors-what-we-can-learn-from-the-betsy-tacy-books/>; Emily Schneider’s “Betsy, Tacy, and Tib Protect Syrian Immigrants,” *Imaginary Elevators: A Blog About Children’s Literature* (February 6, 2018) <https://imaginaryelevators.blog/2018/02/06/362/>; Sally Jo Sorensen’s “Betsy, Tacy and Mike Huckabee Go Over The Big Hill: why that guy’s even sillier than Vox lets on,” *Bluestem Prairie: News from Greater Minnesota and South Dakota* (November 17, 2015) <https://www.bluestemprairie.com/bluestemprairie/2015/11/betsy-tacy-and-mike-huckabee-go-over-the-big-hill-why-that-guys-even-sillier-than-vox-lets-on.html>

target Muslim and Arab Americans, how do we make sense of these positive images? Evelyn Alsutany examines how and where these positive representations emerged post 9/11 in mainstream media. She argues that these images contribute to post-race racism; even seemingly positive images can be used to justify exclusion and inequality:

Positive representations of Arabs and Muslims have helped form a new kind of racism, one that projects antiracism and multiculturalism on the surface but simultaneously produces the logics and affects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices. It is no longer the case that the other is explicitly demonized to justify war or injustice. Now the other is portrayed sympathetically in order to project the United States as an enlightened country that has entered a postrace era. (162)

Alsutany calls them “simplified complex representations,” arguing that they give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex, but in fact they are simple and formulaic: we get to know good and bad Muslims only within the context of terrorism (162). So, for example, this includes images of patriotic Muslims willing to fight terrorism, women who have escaped oppressive Islam, including native informants like Hirsi Ali, or innocent Arab or Muslim Americans who experienced hate crimes or are fleeing barbaric violence “over there” for liberation in the US. These are the good Arabs and Muslims that we should support, and these examples are far from new: the *Deep Valley* and *Betsy-Tacy* books contain women and girls finding liberation in the US that is unavailable at home, innocent children experiencing bigotry, and oppressed people seeking religious freedom in the US.

Nadine Naber points out that “within liberal discourses on tolerance and diversity, the privileging of individual hate crimes over the institutionalization of state violence facilitated US narratives that sought to reduce the post-9/11 backlash...to the acts of a ‘few bad apples’” (3).

The emphasis on good citizens generously tolerating strangers unlike themselves enables inaction in terms of actual structural change. Often, post 9/11 literary representations of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans reflect the development of the ideologies of American goodness, assimilation, and cultural pluralism into standards for cultural and racial representation emerging out of the multicultural movement of the 1980s and diversity and inclusion movements of the 2000s. Both movements emphasize incorporating ethnic content into schools, libraries, or children's materials without changing the structure of school knowledge or children's experience of it.

In doing so, the marketing and educational use of these books (so not always the books themselves) often replicate Orientalism – representing the Arab or Muslim as other or object of knowledge – as well as encouraging assimilation into the status quo. I began this essay with the words of Tib's mother, which should sound familiar to twenty-first century readers; how many well-intentioned memes responding to various refugee and border crises have you stumbled across which say some version of “America is a nation of immigrants”? The popular narrative that the United States was created by industrious immigrants reinforces the nation as emblematic of goodness, like the brave girls on the playground, while eliding the settler colonialism, enslavement, and exclusionary citizenship histories at the core of this claim. As I've argued, the benefits of a diverse community are framed by Emily as Syrians sharing their gaiety, warmth, and kindness, while adopting white American cultural norms. Yet, the acceptance of Syrians into the town is meant to show Emily's growth as a character; it is her narrative arc we follow as readers, just as Naifi's story gives us insight into Betsy, Tacy, and Tib. Emily's rousing speech tells readers something about Emily's integrity and empathy, which in turn generates empathy from a white readership.

There are now a plethora of children's books by non-Arab American and non-Muslim authors that in and of themselves are not necessarily problematic — no white saviors here — but that are repeatedly listed on parent and educator websites as tools to introduce Ramadan, Eid, and Middle Eastern and Islamic cultures more broadly. These books often, like in *Deep Valley*, feature protagonists that share their warmth, hospitality, food, customs, and gaiety with popular characters like Curious George and with readers.⁷ Or they feature protagonists who, like Naifi and Kalil, feel like fish out of water until they learn how to swim. In Lovelace's books, this is framed as assimilation through language and cultural acquisition, and in contemporary books it is often framed through immigrant students who assimilate to classrooms or through the perspective of child refugees who must adapt.⁸

Popular rhetoric about diversity and inclusion, such as stories about welcoming refugees or helping immigrants assimilate, too often endorses a simple moral economy in which we do not need to make structural changes in terms of curricula or hiring diverse teachers or redistricting, let alone changes to domestic and foreign policies that create the conditions for displacement. Another example would be the ways in which young adult novels tackle 9/11, many of which include Muslim characters.⁹ It is crucial to recognize that the US government has been policing and repressing these communities long before 9/11, but too often 9/11 is read as a watershed

⁷ This is not a statement about whether these books belong in US classrooms or in the hands of children – many are useful introductions for children. For examples, see Karen Katz's *My First Ramadan* (Squarefish, 2015); Lisa Bullard and Holli Conger's *Rashad's Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr* (Cloverleaf Books, 2012); Sylvia Whitman's *Under the Ramadan Moon* (Albert Whitman & Company, 2011); and Adria F. Worsham's *Max Celebrates Ramadan* (Picture Window Books, 2008).

⁸ For examples, see the picture books: Eve Bunting's *One Green Apple* (Clarion Books, 2006); Anne Sibley O'Brien's *I'm New Here* (Charlesbridge, 2018); Margriet Ruurs' *Stepping Stones* (Orca Book Publishers, 2016); Suzanne Del Rizzo's *My Beautiful Birds* (Pajama Press, 2017); Doug Kuntz and Amy Shrodes' *Lost and Found Cat* (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2017).

⁹ For examples, see: Wendy Mills' *All We Have Left* (Bloomsbury, 2017); Nora Raleigh Baskin's *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story* (Altheneum Books, 2017); Jewell Parker Rhodes' *Towers Falling* (Little Brown Books, 2018); Gae Polisner's *Memory of Things* (Wednesday Books, 2017).

moment for Arab and Muslim Americans, which often translates into efforts to “normalize” or “humanize” Arab and Muslim Americans through literature, replicating the assimilation and tolerance models found in Lovelace.

Curriculum needs to be decolonized. In an essay for *Rethinking Schools*, Nina Shoman-Dajani points out that her children’s perspectives are never the subject in school, and they are also never the intended audience:

The school curriculum does not attempt to offer understanding from a global perspective so it is no wonder the students turn to my kids with questions. Between my three children and the hundreds of assignments they have completed over the years, I have never witnessed a homework assignment or class assignment refer to Palestine, Arab Americans, or Muslims . . . Curricular silence is not an attempt to remain neutral — it is an acceptance of the Western-dominated narrative that fills our social studies books in U.S. schools.

How then do educators and publishers avoid the problems of multiculturalism and diversity rhetorics, and even inclusion, which can indicate being included in a widening, but ultimately unchanging, status quo? One answer is to highlight the work of #OwnVoices texts: Arab, South Asian, Central Asian, and Muslim authors, with an emphasis on authors who reject notions of tolerance and coexistence (Duyvis). Educator and librarian produced sites such as *Hijabi Librarians* and *Social Justice Books*, or the annual Arab American Book Award winners in the children/young adult category, are useful places to start. Lovelace’s much beloved books about Deep Valley remind readers that Arab Americans have been integral participants in the creation of US history and culture. They should be read with a critical eye alongside books by Arab

American authors that can help educators, parents, librarians, and children think beyond merely widening the representative scope to include more stories.

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