Shahrazad's Enormous Wings: A Parable of Reception

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A la memoria de Toto

كل واحد منا في قلبه حكاية

In every one of our hearts there is a story
Souad Massi, "Raoui"

A special issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* focused on the ambitious topic of "post-magical realism" would be incomplete without at least one essay on *1001 Nights*.[1] During the last century, Shahrazad's stories brought sweet rain to the fields of inspiration that nourished many of the most influential Latin American writers, not only Borges, whose passion for Arabic cultures has long been a subject of interest to scholars, but also Márquez, Allende, and Arturo Uslar Pietri.[2] As Salvador Peña Martín has concluded in one of the few studies dedicated to this reception story: "Lo que es indudable es que, en el ámbito iberoamericano contemporáneo, pero sobre todo en América, las *Noches* se han percibido como un clásico de la literatura universal, que quedaría includido en el más estricto de los cánones" (49).[3] Just a year after Martín's article, Richard van Leeuwen published a nearly 900-page monograph focused on intertextual relationships between *1001 Nights* and twentieth-century fiction.[4] As a part of this far-reaching project, van Leeuwen touches on Borges and Márquez's use of the *Nights*, but also acknowledges the limits of his encyclopedic intertextual approach (283-300; 409-22). After all, reception is never only intertextual, and the reception story between magical realism and the *Nights* in particular involves a kind of writing that does not easily lend itself to systematic analysis—namely, the personal testimony of magical realist writers describing what the *Nights* means to them.

Today, the Arabic recensions of the *Nights* and their many translations appear to

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belong easily to the canons of World Literature, but historically these stories have endured a variety of more contingent positions ranging from dismissal and scholarly neglect, to object of European oriental obsessions, to global postcolonial emblem. Thus, in turning to a question about the relationship between the *Nights* and a specific Latin American literary movement, it is important to bring to mind a sense of the larger story between Arabic and Spanish in which this question sits. At least since the publication of Julia Kushigian's *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition*, the scholarly framework for studying the reception of the *Nights* in Latin America has been tied to the question of "Hispanic orientalism," a question that seeks to open a space for exploring specifically Hispanic receptions of Arabic literature. In particular, Kushigian sought to push back against the totalizing impact of Said's polemical definition of orientalism (see Kushigian 1-3).[5] She draws attention, for example, to how the presence of Arabic within the Spanish language complicates the binaries of self and other that play a key methodological role in Said's analysis. Likewise, Kushigian highlights how centuries of Islamic rule in the Iberian peninsula fundamentally changes the historical terms of reception analysis in Hispanic contexts. Both problems have long received attention in the study of medieval Spanish literature, but Said's influential focus on French- and English-language receptions had the additional effect of pushing these specifically Hispanic questions out of view, especially in the American School of Comparative Literature, where Orientalism was embraced as a canonical work. Against Said, Kushigian develops a fluid, even optimistic view of Hispanic receptions of the orient, which "relies on qualities of openendedness, polyglossia, and vulnerability evidenced in a process of renewing the self through an understanding of the other" (104).

Kushigian's book contributed to opening a new space to explore Hispanic receptions of Arabic literature. It also participated in the emergence of a broader set of scholarly conversations on "South-South" studies. In this respect, Araceli Tinajero's *Orientalisms of the Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Worlds* has extended Kushigian's study, but what is of greater relevance here is the work of Wail Hassan. Since the early 2000s, Hassan has led, expanded, and disseminated a vigorous sense of the importance and promise of South-South studies for Comparative Literature, especially those between Latin America and the Arab world.[6] For Hassan, such studies are not only of deep interest in their own right; they also have essential roles to play in providing a place from which to adopt and sustain a critical point of view on Comparative Literature itself as the field globalizes. Like that of Kushigian, Hassan's work draws attention to multiple layers of relation that connect Latin American and Arabic-language cultures. He calls for a "more capacious comparatism" ("Which Languages?" 7), and analyzes multiple models for exploring such relationships, ranging from comparativizing American Studies, to globalizing Comparative Literature, to World Literature, to Hemisphere Studies.

A third relevant dimension is the burgeoning work on the *Nights* themselves. In this respect, the works of Martín, van Leeuwen, Kushigian, Tinajero, and Hassan are all

further illuminated by being read alongside contemporary frameworks for thinking about audiences and cultural encounters in the medieval Islamic world from which the *Nights* come, such as Samer Ali's *Arabic Literary Salons in the Islamic Middle Ages* and the notion of "crosspollinations" put forward in a volume jointly edited by Anna Akasoy, Peter E. Pormann, and James Montgomery.[7] Broader reflection on the interconnectedness of a diverse Mediterranean also provides an important touchstone in these reappraisals of intercultural life, as the volume edited by Brian Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita succinctly demonstrates.[8] As Akasoy herself has put it, part of the analytic appeal of the *Nights* lies in how it both contains its own audience within it in the form of Shahriyar, but also invites "ever new audiences" to reflect on and, in so doing, become a part of the story ("Philosophy in the Narrative Mode" 126). This quality is certainly a part of what drew so many magical realist writers to the *Nights*.

To say as much is to point to a reception story that could not possibly be encompassed in a single article, but this story's vastness also indicates why a topic like "post-magical realism," which seems to be about the future, also calls for further grappling with the past. In this light, rather than a reception history in the traditional sense, or a systematic intertextual analysis, what I offer in the rest of this article is an essay that interprets a single piece of this past from the perspective of Comparative Literature. Concretely, I compare what four magical realist writers say the *Nights* means to them with similar testimony from three leading interpreters of the *Nights* from Arabic-speaking worlds: Hussain Haddawy, the translator of the Norton edition of *1001 Nights*, Muhsin Mahdi, the editor of the critical edition of the *Nights,* and the man Wail Hassan has called one of the "most original literary critics" in the Arab world, Abdelfattah Kilito (see *Thou Shalt* vii).

In comparing testimony from Borges, Allende, Márquez, and Pietri, my goal is not to analyze these writers' whole relationship with the *Nights*, but rather to present a thought-provoking element from each of their accounts.[9] Thus, I initially emphasize the differences between them, calling attention to the organizing role of "infinity" in Borges's reception, "rebellion" in Allende's, "names" in Márquez's, and "refuge" in Pietri's. My aim in making these distinctions, however, is not to reduce any writer's experience of the *Nights* to a single word, but rather to work against a subtle tendency to treat Latin America itself as a single horizon of reception. At the same time, for all their differences, the statements by the authors that I study here are unified in one important respect: none of them mention either a living, Arabic-speaking person or a person of Arab descent with whom they are in dialogue about the *Nights*, though one comes close. This observation is not necessarily a criticism. As the details of these writers' lives often show, many factors influenced this notable absence. That said, this point of convergence does invite broader reflection on how cultural, textual, political, and personal dimensions of reception intersect in complex, often surprising ways—a memorable effect that arguably lends these testimonies a second, deeper dimension. Viewed individually as descriptions of personal experience, they offer material for reception history. Taken collectively and compared, they present an open-ended par-

able of reception.

In a 1984 issue of *The Georgia Review*, English-language readers had the chance to hear Borges pouring out praise for the West's "discovery of the East" in a piece that still stands as one of the most memorable ever by a Latin American author on the subject of *1001 Nights*. This piece's original title in Spanish was simply "Las mil y una noches," and from start to finish, the single word that rings out from it is "infinito."[10] The word occurs nine times in nine pages, so that when Borges tells us "La idea de infinito es consustancial con *Las mil y una noches*" (*Obras* 3: 477),[11] he is also telling us something about the rhetorical structure of his lecture. But what kinds of different things might this "infinity" mean? "Infinite" in what senses? This piece was originally delivered in el Teatro Coliseo on 22 June 1977 as part of a series of lectures Borges gave in Buenos Aires that year (*Obras* 3: 444). It recapitulates and condenses decades of Borges's thinking on the *Nights*. According to Alastair Reid, these lectures are largely a tapestry of other lectures Borges gave in one form or another during the 1970s as he toured Europe, South America, and the United States. In presenting them in written form, Reid emphasizes the need to imagine them spoken by Borges (5), and he praises the living qualities of the singular Borgesian voice. This celebrated quality, however, also points to the essay's greatest limit: the presence of only one voice. On the one hand, Borges writes reverently, "Vemos así lo admirable que es el mundo y lo entreveradas que están las cosas" (*Obra*s 3: 382).[12] On the other hand, this laudable vision of an intertwined humanity finds its counterpoint in the observation that, after a lifetime of engagement with Arabic literature, there is still no living interlocutor from the Arab world that comes to Borges's mind as worthy of mention in this piece.

This image of a Borgesian voice threading through the infinite labyrinth of the *Nights* alone recalls a story that Borges himself once wrote about Averroes reading Aristotle's *Poetics*. In this well-known story Borges plays with Ernst Renan's influential interpretation of Averroes, especially an anecdote about the judge from Cordoba's difficulty understanding the meanings of "tragedy" and "comedy" in classical Greek theatre.[13] As many have observed, however, the most important part of the story is not about Averroes at all, but about Borges, a fact that becomes especially clear at the end of "La Busca de Averroes":

> Sentí que Averroes, queriendo imaginar lo que es un drama sin haber sospechado lo que es un teatro, no era más absurdo que yo, queriendo imaginar a Averroes, sin otro material que unos adarmes de Renan, de Lane y Asín Palacios. Sentí, en la última página, que mi narración era un símbolo del hombre que yo fui, mientras la escribía y que, para redactar esa narración, yo tuve que ser aquel hombre y que, para ser aquel hombre, yo tuve que redactar esa narración, y así hasta lo infinito. (*Obras* 1: 1036)[14]

Many scholars have pointed to the importance of "infinity" in Borges's wider work, and Kushigian and van Leeuwen both identify it as central to Borges's engagement with the orient in particular (Kushigian 19; van Leeuwen 289). However, one should not conclude from its prevalence as a trope that the idea of "infinity" always has

precisely the same meaning throughout Borges's work. To the contrary, its meanings are often quite rhetorically specific. In this passage, for example, the idea of infinity emerges through a meditation on a particular limit—namely, the limits of both Averroes and Borges as interpreters of texts from another culture and language. Thus, it has a particular tie to questions of translatability, cultural blind spots, and at the same time what Evelyn Fishburn calls Borges's wider interest in *regressus* ("Readings" 35).

By contrast in "Las mil y una noches," Borges's infinity strikes a note of nostalgia, and his insistence on the infinity of the *Nights* has the cumulative effect of bringing to mind a different kind of finitude. Borges begins this lecture with a famous grand statement about East and West, but the opening's emotional center lies in the parallel mention of a childhood in which Borges claims to have fallen in love with *Las Noches*:

> Un acontecimiento capital de la historia de las naciones occidentales es el descubrimiento del Oriente. Sería más exacto hablar de una conciencia del Oriente, continua, comparable a la presencia de Persia en la historia griega. Además de esa concienca del Oriente—algo vasto, inmóvil, magnifico, incomprensible—hay altos momentos y voy a enumerar algunos. Lo que me parece conveniente, si queremos entrar en este tema que yo quiero tanto, que he querido desde la infancia, el tema del *Libro de las mil y una noches*… (Obras 3: 375)[15]

Here, history is not presented for its own sake, but offered as a way into talking about a personal, lifelong experience of the *Nights*, a subtle gesture that already contains within it the essay's central tension: that between the timeless-seeming achievements of great individuals and societies and the ceaseless flow of history. On the one hand, Greece, Persia, and Alexander rise as examples of historical societies or figures who appeared infinite in their own times and places. On the other hand, the unstoppable narration of human achievements also brings to mind how each of these great figures eventually passed into the streams of history. In this respect, it is important to notice that it is the *Nights* themselves that interrupt the flow of Borges's tracing of human history in this essay. After zig-zagging like an erudite Loki through Vergil, Pliny, and Harun al-Rashid, through King Porus of India, Juvenal, and Cervantes, through Lope de Vega, Charlemagne, the Crusades, and Coleridge, there is Alexander—a symbol of peak human mastery—and finally there is the *Nights*. Then, there is a stopping of time: "Quiero detenerme en el título" (*Obras* 3: 376-77).[16] This raises an interesting question. In this lecture, what is the "time" which the *Nights* stops?

According to many development psychologists, during childhood our individual lives appear to extend infinitely into the future. Likewise, the people in our lives seem as though they will always be there, but as an aging Borges must himself have known as he gave this lecture, eventually this sense of endless time gives way to an experience of finitude, and this has consequences for how one develops not only a sense of history, but also a sense of "infinity." In an essay near the end of *Playing and Reality* called "The Place Where We Live," pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott distinguishes between two broad tendencies in human experiences of

infinity—in short, between those who locate infinity in the external world and those who find it within. This model can help us draw out the dialectical nature of "infinity" in Borges's reflections. The infinite regress at the end of "La Busca de Averroes," for example, is presented as part of Borges's writerly and even human identity. In other words, it lies, to borrow from Winnicott, "at the center of the self" (141). In contrast, the infinity Borges ascribes to the Nights better reflects Winnicott's second category of experience—those people for whom infinity is "reaching out beyond the moon to the stars and to the beginning and the end of time, time that has neither an end nor a beginning" (Winnicott 141).

Recognizing this subtle distinction allows us to better appreciate how in "Las mil y una noches," Borges is actually negotiating two different infinities that run through his work, one internal, one external. What is more, it is at the place where these two infinities meet that the essay's most memorable image emerges: the volumes of Burton's translation on Borges's shelf:

> Tengo en casa, los diecisiete volúmenes de la versión de Burton. Sé que nunca los habré leído todos pero sé que ahí están las noches esperándome; que mi vida puede ser desdichada pero ahí estarán los diecisiete volúmenes; ahí estará esa especie de eternidad de *Las mil y una noches* del Oriente. (*Obras* 3: 380)[17]

These unread volumes of Burton's translation evoke a powerful sense of human limits, but they also do something much more specific: they tie the theme of untranslatability to the theme of mortality. If we consider this from a Winnicottian perspective, untranslatability answers to the external infinity, and mortality to the internal one. But what about the *Nights* themselves? The *Nights*, for Borges, are the bridge between the two. This key connection lends the Borgesian voice in this lecture an additional allegorical quality, symbolized in these volumes of Burton, in which the individual life is looked at, against the backdrop of history, as an act of unfinished reading.

Borges's emphasis on the infinity of the *Nights* invites us to ask in more general terms an obvious but nevertheless interesting question: In what ways might Shahrazad's stories actually be considered infinite? From whose perspectives? The *Nights* stories entered the world of European languages through Galland's famous eighteenth-century work *Les mille et une nuits*, which combined a translation that drew primarily on a single fourteenth/fifteenth-century Syrian manuscript and an adaptation of stories told to him in person by a Syrian Maronite storyteller named Hanna Diyab.[18] In their medieval Arabic recensions the *Nights'* origins have proven elusive, but they appear to draw on a mixture of earlier Persian, Indian, and perhaps even Chinese cultures. At the same time they also have their own roots in a variety of Islamic and Islamicate contexts, from the scrap of ninth-century Abbasid paper that contains a small piece of the frame tale, to the world of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Mamluk literature and the Syrian recension that Mahdi edited, to eighteenth-century Cairo and the complex political geographies that led to editions like MacNaghten's being first published in India. Additionally, though Muhsin

al-Musawi has highlighted the Islamic context of the *Nights*, it is also likely that Christian and Jewish communities contributed to Shahrazad's storytelling tradition, a point made by Joseph Sadan at the beginning of *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*, supported by the framework of "crosspollination," and also suggested by Mahdi himself in the introduction to the critical edition.[19]

This is a vast history, but is it infinite? Borges represents one well-known example of a person who often answers yes to this question, but even he doesn't seem to be actually suggesting that the *Nights* as a text are infinite. The ambition of his description is not mathematically descriptive. It is evocative and literary, a panegyric from a personal perspective. Has the *Nights* historically attracted such infinite praise from the Arab world? To the contrary, as Abdelfattah Kilito has pointed out in *Les arabes et l'art du récit*, before the nineteenth century the *Nights* drew little attention from Arabic-language writers and critics in Arab worlds, especially compared to Arabic poetry (11-13; 116-25). Similarly, Kilito, van Leeuwen, Muhsin Jassim Ali, and others have also observed that Shahrazad's stories did not attract very much attention in Arabic-language scholarship prior to the middle of the twentieth century, when Egyptian reformist Taha Hussein and German orientalist Enno Littmann supervised an influential dissertation on the *Nights* by Suhayr al-Qalamawi in 1943 (van Leeuwen, "*1001 Nights* and the Novel" 105-06; Azouqa iii-vi; Ali 3-7). In short, the reception of the *Nights* in Arabic-language literary cultures prior to the twentieth century provides a point of comparison for making sense of receptions such as Borges's that emphasize the *Nights*' infinity and boundless appeal.

That said, some twentieth-century critics from the Arab world do also speak of the Nights' infinity, though the evocative and literary dimensions of these descriptions are different from Borges's. Kilito, for example, has his own sense of the "infinity" of the Nights. Like Borges's interpretation, this infinity bears an important connection to Kilito's reading of the *Nights* as a child, as well as to the theme of mortality. Kilito begins his dedicated study of Shahrazad's stories by teasing the reader with the legend that anyone who reads the *Nights* from beginning to end will immediately die; then he writes:

> Que le lecteur se rassure: il ne mourra pas à cause des *Nuits*, car, le souhaiterait-il, il ne pourrait jamais venir à bout de ce livre éclaté, corpus d'innombrables manuscrits, éditions, traductions, additions, exégèses et réécritures. Il y aura toujours un autre texte des Nuits à découvrir, á lire. La condamnation superstitieuse se perd dans les méanders d'un livre qu'on a considéré à juste titre comme infini. (*L'œil et l'aiguille* 9-10)[20]

On the one hand, this opening is noticeably less rapturous than Borges's grand "discovery of the East." Indeed, by comparison Kilito seems resigned to the *Nights*' infinity, rather than enthralled by it. On the other hand, Kilito's opening casts a spell of its own. Rhetorically speaking, it avoids nostalgia and instead dons a voice that aims for something funnier. After all, if the mantric "infinity" of the *Nights* in Borges has an almost superstitious quality, Kilito frames the *Nights*' infinity as a cure to such superstitions. Borges sees that he will die before finishing the Burton transla-

tion. Kilito sees that the *Nights* will live, but only in the messy and sobering realities of textual history. In this way the Moroccan critic strikes a note rarely ever struck by readers of the *Nights* outside of the Arab world—disenchantment, an important note which he raises again almost twenty years later in a chapter titled "*Les Nuits*, un Livre Ennuyeux?" (*Les Arabes et l'art du récit* 129-36). Indeed, there is perhaps even an element of parody in these expressions of disenchantment. Kilito first encountered Borges's own work in the mid-1980s and immediately felt a deep affinity to it, so it is possible that one of the targets of Kilito's dispelling magic is Borges himself (Achour 49-56). Still, it would be wrong to suggest that Kilito lands in disillusion. For him, too, the *Nights* are infinite, and his parody provokes a new sense of curiosity about Shahrazad's stories through its language of discovery cast in irreverent and reassuring terms.

This same tone characterizes Kilito's memories of the *Nights* from childhood. He begins by admitting that he is not sure the *Nights* was the first book he ever read, but he accepts the idea as a thought experiment:

> Admettons cependant, puisque cela m'arrange, que les *Nuits* soient le premier livre que j'ai lu. Que penser maintenant d'une autre prétention, à savoir que je l'ai aimé. Vraiment? Question redoutable, car qui oserait aujourd'hui dire le contraire? Pour qui passerais-je si je déclarais que je ne l'avais apprécié que médiocrement? En réalité, je ne peux rien affirmer du tout; je ne peux même pas dire que je l'ai lu; je l'ai certes eu entre les mains (dans l'édition de Beyrouth, expurgée mais agréablement présentée), mais je n'ai pas le moindre souvenir d'avoir été émerveillé par telle ou telle histoire. Peut-être n'étais-je pas alors capable de lire, la lecture d'un récit supposant, outre la conaissance de la langue, l'acquisition d'un certain nombre de codes narratifs. (*Les Arabes* 129-30)[21]

Here again, there is a core element of play that makes Borges's reception appear by comparison almost grave. Kilito's framing also suggests an awareness of how the idea of the *Nights* as a treasured childhood book has taken on the stature of a literary trope. Additionally, both Borges and Kilito appear to bear down on historical reality when writing about the *Nights*, but Kilito's focus lands more squarely on material realities (the Beirut edition in his hands) and cognitive faculties (language and narrative codes). It also engages a critical curiosity regarding his own nostalgic recall of the *Nights*. In comparison, for all the time he spends on civilizations, Borges engages the history of the *Nights* primarily as an idealized horizon for personal reflection, which is also the only perspective from which it makes sense to conclude about the *Nights*, as Borges does, "Es un libro tan vasto que no es necessario haberlo leído, ya que es parte previa de nuestra memoria..." (*Obras* 3: 383).[22] But who does Borges mean to include in this "nuestra"? I ask this not in a spirit of critique, but one of genuine curiosity. Perhaps it is simply the audience in el Teatro Coliseo on the night of the lecture in Buenos Aires, but it seems intended to reach further. If given the opportunity by Borges, would Kilito include himself in this group? It is hard to say, but if he did include himself, would that change our sense of the significance of his question about whether he really read the book at all as a child? By the same token,

would anything change in our sense of Borges's love for the *Nights* if it turned out that he hadn't actually read the book as a child? What if he only held a translation of Mardrus in his hands?

Writing this article, I stopped many times to wonder what a conversation on the *Nights* between Borges and Kilito would have been like. As far as I know, such a conversation never happened. To his credit, Borges seems to be aware that his reading of the *Nights* represents a quite different take from its reception in the Arab world (*Obras* 3: 379), but this does not appear to have fuelled his curiosity to compare his reading with interpreters from Arabic-language cultures, even highly sympathetic ones like Kilito. Isabel Allende represents a second interesting example of this kind of missed opportunity. In the mid-1950s, she spent most of her high school years in Beirut, where her stepfather was on a diplomatic mission. One might think from this biographical fact that she, of all the giants of magical realism, had the best chance to connect with living Arabic-language storytellers and their audiences, as well as the most obvious reasons for doing so. However, when she describes her experience in Lebanon, it is clear that she found connecting difficult for many reasons: the complex political realities of the Lebanon into which she arrived, linguistic and cultural barriers, a difficult family life, and the challenge of starting over in a totally different country during her teenage years (Zapata 49-53).

Allende recommends Celia Correas Zapata's book as a source for learning about her life, but she also endorses a compilation of interview answers on her website, which speak to her relationship to the *Nights*. Indeed, the characterizations in both Zapata's book and this compilation are similar, lending the impression that Allende has worked out a stable place for the *Nights* in her sense of autobiography. In this regard, what stands out most about her experience of the *Nights* is its solitary quality, as well as the connection between this solitude and Allende's sense of rebellion. After speaking easily of the influence of specific Latin American writers from the previous generation like Cortázar and Borges himself, Russian writers like Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, British and American writers like the Brontë sisters and Mark Twain, Allende turns to the Nights and says:

> Descubrí la fantasía y el erotismo en *Las Mil y Una Noches*, que leí en el Líbano a los catorce años. En ese momento y en ese lugar, las niñas no tenían vida social al margen de la escuela y la familia, ni siquiera íbamos al cine. Mi único escape de una vida familiar problemática era la lectura. Mi padrastro tenía cuatro misteriosos volúmenes empastados en cuero en su armario que mantenía cerrado con llave, libros prohibidos, que yo no debía mirar porque eran "eróticos." Por supuesto, encontré la forma de hacer una copia de la llave y entrar en el armario cuando él no estaba. Me alumbraba con una linterna, no podía marcar las páginas y leía rápidamente, saltando páginas en busca de las partes cochinas, con las hormonas alborotadas y la imaginación enloquecida por esos cuentos fantásticos. Cuando algún crítico me ha llamado la Sheherazade Latinoamérica me siento muy halagada. ("Entrevista")[23]

It is a memorable feminist awakening, which captures a spirit of rebellion central to

Allende's celebrated work. In just this one paragraph, there is a rebellion against the limits placed on teenage girls in mid-century Lebanon, a rebellion against a stepfather, and a rebellion against a troubled family life. There is also the rebellion of forging a key and using it to enter a locked closet, the rebellion of sexual exploration, which the key partly prefigures, and the rebellion of the body itself in raging hormones, all of which combine in the embrace of rebellion itself as a writerly identity in the image of a storyteller from another culture, "Sheherazade."

But how do we relate this powerful testimony to the work of the female Arab writers who were Allende's contemporaries? Some of these were also celebrated as "Shahrazads." For example, Allende's Beirut contemporary Layla Baalbakki published her first, controversial novel *Ana Ahya (I Live)* in 1958, and by 1963, George Sfeir was crediting her in *The New York Times* as having broken "new ground in the land of the *Arabian Nights*, launching a cult of freedom-fighting Scheherazades" (Sfeir). Does Allende see herself as part of this cult? Was she aware of it? I asked a moment ago if Kilito would have included himself in Borges's "nuestra." Would Allende, if given the opportunity by Baalbakki, have included herself in this Arab feminist "nuestra"? It is hard to say, but what does seem clear is this: the *Nights* is often celebrated—and justly so—as a text that brings people from different cultures together, but it is equally important to recognize that in other ways, through the reinscription of stereotypes that plague its reception history, the *Nights* has also kept people apart. It seems wrong to ascribe to a fourteen-year-old Allende the perpetuation of a debilitating orientalist stereotype regarding the sexual excess of oriental cultures, especially because in her memory of it, the discovery of sexuality empowers her against equally debilitating restrictions on women. At the same time, one wonders why Allende as an adult might not have revised, qualified, or further contextualized what the erotic dimension of the *Nights* means to her, and how she relates this to what Brian Edwards has called "the debilitating logics of the American century" (218).

In this respect, it is interesting to compare Muhsin Mahdi's introduction to the critical edition of the Syrian recension of the *Nights*. By way of preface, I am not suggesting that this introduction represents personal testimony in the same way as Borges's, Allende's, and Kilito's texts, but it does take on a personal dimension when one compares it to the English introduction in the same volume. Mahdi was himself Iraqi-American, so his choice to write two different introductions to the same critical edition should be interpreted as a reasoned and deliberate one that reflects a critical perspective about the Nights and its reception. The difference is clear from the first paragraph. In the English introduction, he begins with an informative and erudite, but also somewhat dry summary of the history of the translation of the *Nights* beginning with Galland. The Arabic introduction begins as follows:

فإن قصص العرب من مفاخر ما نضح به طبعها وأبدعه خيالها وسقاه ذوقها، شاعت بينها في جاهليتها وبعد إسلامها وتناقلها أهل الوبر والحضر منها، وسارت إلى غيرها من الأمم حتى طبق ذكرها الآفاق ونقلتها الأعاجم فأذابت قلوبها وسحرت عقولها. ولم يجمع كتاب من قصصها وحكاياتها وأمثالها ما جمعه هذا الكتاب ولا حظي غيره بما حظي به عندها وعند غيرها. نقلته الرواة في المدن

المعمورة وأنس به أهل الحضر في منازلهم أوقات سمرهم وارتاحت له نفوس الصناع والتجار بعد فراغهم من صناعتهم وتجارتهم. سعدت بسماع ما احتواه العامة واعتبرت برموزه وإشاراته الخاصة. وقبل أن يطبع تعددت وانتشرت نسخه الخطية ونقل منها إلى لغات شرقية وغربية. (١٢)[24]

Here Mahdi celebrates the *Nights*, not just as a cosmopolitan text, but as a worlding agent that contributed in substantive historical ways to the interconnected cultural networks on which cosmopolitanism, including Allende's, rests. Additionally, for Mahdi, the *Nights* connects people not just from many cultures but from many walks of life, a point underscored by Paulo Lemos Horta's study as well.[25] Why not begin the English introduction in the same way? This is perhaps a question better left to an intellectual biographer, but what clearly emerges from the juxtaposition between Mahdi and Allende is the vast gulf of cultures, languages, and experiences that accompany the *Nights* as a multicultural text. Mahdi's storytellers-in-the-streets, told after work and spreading organically from house to house, are virtually the antithesis of Allende's locked closet. Likewise, Mahdi's sense of the pre-Islamic history of these stories stands in stark contrast to Allende's embrace of "Shahrazad" as a label applied without any particular sense of history at all.

To say as much is not necessarily to single out Allende for criticism. Like "infinity" in the work of Borges, "solitude" and "rebellion" are recurring themes in Allende's work, so it makes sense that some of her most meaningful literary experiences are framed as solitary rebellions. On the other hand, this juxtaposition between Allende and Mahdi, paired with my earlier comparison between Borges and Kilito, is intended to raise an important question: In turning to magical realist writers and the *Nights*, how do we begin to work through the broader set of entanglements that exist between Arab and American cultures? Chronologically speaking, the emergence and reception of magical realism itself has often coincided with enormous changes in political relations between Arab and American worlds, a reality which began long before Allende landed in Beirut. In 1938, for example, two years after Venezuelan writer and politician Arturo Uslar Pietri published "La Lluvia" as one of the earliest examples of magical realism, a Stanford geologist named Max Steineke—as if granting the wish of Ibn Saud—finally discovered commercial quantities of oil at Dammam No. 7.[26] Likewise, in the decade before 9/11, magical realism was heralded as the global postcolonial form of literary resistance *par excellence*.[27] In an August 2001 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Chilean critic and author Alberto Fuguet disseminated the *McOndo* critique beyond specialists, and by 2002, the staff of *Newsweek* was asking, "Is Magical Realism dead?"[28] It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the complex connections between scholarship, publishing, and geopolitics suggested by this chronology, but what emerges even from this brief sweep is significant. In Borges, the theme of childhood evoked by the *Nights* bears a connection to mortality; and in Allende, it relates to solitude, sexuality, and rebellion. However, childhood also brings into view the reality that we all grow up somewhere, as historical and cultural beings. In other words, as we explore the entanglements that

surround Borges's and Allende's childhood receptions of the *Nights*, do we not also have to begin to speak of our own?

I write this as a North American scholar from a mixed North and South American background, and I am aware, for example, that from my particular perspective I occasionally run the risk of seeming to have joined "the Americas." My intention in this regard is not to ignore important work like Hassan's that seeks to connect Arabic-language and specifically South American literary cultures in South-South relations. Nor is it to pass over a basic set of truths captured in Fuguet's critique. To the contrary, I grew up amidst conversations between a father from Miami Beach and a mother from Caracas that impressed upon me the importance of being able to distinguish carefully between North and South. My intention is also not to substitute for the more complex political geometries that guide contemporary global south studies the kind of binary between East and West that played an important, if contested role in Said's work. It is simply to speak from a point of view, as a limited observer, that I myself represent, in which North and South American cultures, especially when looking East, do not often seem to me to follow the simple lines of national boundaries, much less continental ones. If from this perspective I sometimes underplay the role of national cultures, the reason is, in part, that what I have in view is how hard it is to say exactly where in the Western hemisphere the larger reception dynamic that has made a habit of missing opportunities to connect with the Arab world really begins and ends.

In one of the most famous *cuentos* from the magical realist canon, Gabriel García Márquez recounts the story of an unfamiliar person whose unexpected arrival in the middle of a storm of crabs drums up a powerful curiosity and enthusiasm. Quickly identified by a villager as an "angel," this winged being receives both the distant praise of heavenly things and the intimate abuse of a caged animal. Indeed, the bruised and soiled being so captivates the local imagination that the owners of the house where he lands quickly become wealthy by charging admission to see him. Moving between moments of mordant irony directed at the hypocrisy of the Catholic church and passages of carnivalesque tragedy, the magic of "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," nevertheless, subtly turns on something very real: neither Elisenda nor Pelayo (the two characters who receive the angel), nor the priest, nor the bishop can understand the language of the being with the wings who has arrived in their community. As a result, they lack the most important basis upon which to begin understanding his story.

Villagers fantasize about a series of possible superhuman futures for him—as mayor of the world, as the father of a winged race to come, as a five-star general to win all wars. Clergymen, who have the most to lose in this speculation, contest these predictions, pointing to an all-too-human smell coming from the being's wings. All the while, the old man tries to communicate, but his hosts cannot even identify his language. The leading theory, however, is interesting. Father Gonzaga speculates that the "angel" speaks a language related to Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language that

could connect the foreigner to the figure of Jesus. At the same time, it opens up a broader set of Semitic possibilities, among them Hebrew. If the angel were speaking Hebrew, however, someone in the train of Catholic figures who visit him would presumably have recognized a word or two. What is the next closest relative to Aramaic? Probably Syriac, but another candidate is Arabic. The point of raising such a possibility is not to argue for a definitive new reading. Indeed, positive identification may miss the point. However, even just entertaining the possibility that the old man with enormous wings is an Arabic speaker is enough to transform the tale of Elisenda and Pelayo from something magical into something far more real, for as soon as we do a much broader tragedy of longstanding anti-Arab and Islamophobic prejudice makes a disquieting emergence in this celebrated story.

Márquez's own testimony on the meaning of the *Nights* also revolves around a problem of language, specifically, a problem of naming. As he tells us in *Vivir para contarla*, he was having trouble learning to read because of the names of the letters. In recounting how he overcame this difficulty, he brings us back to a Montessori school he clearly loved:

> Me costó mucho aprender a leer. No me parecía lógico que la letra m se llamara eme, y sin embargo con la vocal siguiente no se dijera emea sino ma. Me era imposible leer así. Por fin, cuando llegué al Montessori la maestra no me enseñó los nombres sino los sonidos de las consonantes. Así pude leer el primer libro que encontré en un arcón polvoriento del depósito de la casa. Estaba descosido e incompleto, pero me absorbió de un modo tan intenso que el novio de Sara soltó al pasar una premonición aterradora: «¡Carajo!, este niño va a ser escritor». (115-16)[29]

The account is memorable in its own right. It shares with Allende's the sense of the *Nights* as a dusty book discovered in solitude, but what lends it an additional dimension in the context of the present analysis are the paragraphs that surround it. In the paragraph that immediately follows this story, Márquez claims that he didn't know the name of the dusty book at the time he began reading from it. In fact, he claims that he did not connect it to *Las mil y una noches* until many years later. For Márquez, the *Nights* begins as a text not only without an author but also without a name. On the other hand, two paragraphs earlier, Márquez tells us something of arguably greater importance than the name of this book: the names of his two childhood best friends. The first was Juanita Mendoza. Tragically, she died from typhus while a student at the Montessori school. The second, whom Marquez describes in loving terms as "mi amigo desde el primer recreo, y mi médico infalible para las resacas de los lunes," was named Guillermo Valencia Abdala (115).[30]

Was Márquez's childhood best friend, then, of Arab descent? As Márquez's biographer Gerald Martin points out, the city of Aracataca where Márquez spent this formative early period of his childhood was home to a vibrantly diverse community of immigrants, including Europeans, Venezuelans, and a large population of people from the Arab world (see Martin; Iguider 169-71). The same was true of Barranquilla, where Márquez later moved (Martin 126). In fact, according to Martin, Márquez him-

self was "frequently mistaken for an Arab" (209). Thus, though Márquez's discovery of the *Nights* seems at first to happen in solitude like Allende's, it is in fact surrounded from the beginning by figures such as Guillermo Abdala, who reflect Márquez's lifelong personal connections to people of Arab descent in Colombia, not least among them his wife Mercedes Barcha, a woman of Egyptian descent (Iguider 313-16). Likewise, Arab characters are also integral parts of Márquez's literary worlds. Still, these facts in some ways make it even more remarkable that in telling the authoritative version of how he learned to read, which also includes a prophecy about him becoming a writer, Márquez highlights the *Nights* but makes no connection, even in retrospect, between this piece of Arabic literature and his many relationships with people from the Arab world. Was Guillermo Abdala perhaps nearby at the moment Márquez started reading the *Nights*? Did the two ever talk about Shahrazad's stories? Did anyone at the Montessori school ever read it to them together? Did Guillermo identify with the stories as an aspect of his heritage? If so, couldn't he have helped Márquez with the name of the book? What about Márquez and Barcha; did they ever debate their interpretations of Shahrazad?

At the beginning of this essay, I drew attention to the fact that the magical realist writers I look at here do not connect their receptions of the *Nights* to a living person from the Arab world, but this clearly means different things in the case of each writer. Borges is deeply immersed in the writing of Arabs from the medieval Islamic world. Allende lived in Beirut. Márquez has many close relationships with Arabs in Colombia. What is missing in these is not necessarily a sense of connection to the living Arab world *per se*, but a connection between this world and the *Nights*. In making this distinction, it is useful to compare Márquez's account with Hussain Haddawy's childhood memories of the *Nights*, as he shares them in the introduction to his English translation of Mahdi's critical edition. Like that of Márquez, Haddawy's experience revolves around names, but in a very different way:

> It has been some time now since as a little boy in Baghdad I used to listen to tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*. It sometimes seems like yesterday, sometimes like ages ago, for the Baghdad I knew then seems now closer to the time of the *Nights* than to our own times. It was on long winter nights, when my grandmother was visited by one lady or another, Um Fatma or Um Ali, always dressed in black, still mourning for a husband or a son, long lost […] I waited patiently, while she and my grandmother exchanged news, indulged in gossip, and whispered one or two asides. Then there would be a pause, and the lady would smile at me, and I would seize the proffered opportunity to ask for a story—a long story... (Haddawy xii)

Here, a group of women are tentatively named—Um Fatma, Um Ali—but Haddawy's uncertainty about their names does not evokes a sense of absence. To the contrary, it speaks to the abundant presence of many female figures in his memory of the Nights: too many to name. The mood is warm and social, but the backdrop is also tragic. Haddawy's excitement, even as a child, is cast against the shadow of twentieth-century military and political catastrophes that robbed so many women of husbands

and sons.

Haddawy absorbs all this through his attunement to the women's distress and grief. In this regard, Shahrazad's stories for Haddawy are deeply nested not only in a literary tradition, but in a whole, embodied experience. What is more, unlike the textual emphasis in Borges, Allende, and Márquez, for Haddawy the *Nights* are associated with oral and improvised storytelling:

> The lady would begin the story, and I would listen, first apprehensively, knowing that she would improvise, depending on how early or late the hour. If it was early enough, she would spin the yarn leisurely, amplifying here and interpolating there episodes I recognized from other stories. And even though this sometimes troubled my childish notions of honesty and my sense of security in reliving familiar events, I never objected, because it prolonged the action and the pleasure… (Haddawy xii)

Here, the experience of the *Nights* is an experience less of magical pleasure in a faraway place than of the gratification of real connection to a group of beloved female figures, helping the child find peace before sleep during troubled nights. In his recollection, Haddawy's grandmother emerges as both an individual and a particularly central ally:

> Sometimes my grandmother, out of love for me and her own delight in the story, would add her voice to mine, and the lady, pleased to be appreciated and happy to oblige, would consent to go on, narrating in a gentle, steady voice, except when she impersonated a man or a woman in a moment of passion or a demon in a fit of anger, at times getting up to act out the part. Her pauses were just as delicious as her words… (Haddawy xii)

In the open space of this last image, it is clear that what most distinguishes Haddawy's reception from those of Borges, Allende, and Márquez is that his is not only a portrait of a loved text, but also of beloved people.

In his allusions to the political situation in twentieth-century Baghdad, Haddawy's reception brings us to a final layer that needs to be explored: a broader network of specifically political entanglement. This is an important layer because these political entanglements have often involved a history of violence. In this respect, though writers such as Borges, Allende, and Márquez were all political in a variety of senses, they were also not professional political figures, and it is important to be able to name this because other magical realist writers were. One such figure is Alejo Carpentier, widely celebrated for his idea of "lo real maravilloso," first presented in the preface to his novel *El Reino de Este Mundo* in 1949 (Zamora and Faris 75-76). Politically speaking, Carpentier identified with Castro's movement and with revolutionary mid-century Latin American politics in general, though some scholars find that after he was jailed in the 1920s for his political activity, he grew less active (Craig). There is, however, another magical realist writer, also credited with coinage of the original term, who was arguably the most accomplished of the magical realist writers as a professional political figure: Arturo Uslar Pietri. According to Enrique Anderson Imbert, Pietri in fact used "realismo mágico" in 1948 without reference to Franz Roh, and before

Alejo Carpentier's better known use of "lo real maravilloso" (2). Today, however, Pietri is remembered less for his *realismo mágico* than for the story he tried to write for Venezuelans like my grandmother about the future of the Venezuelan economy, memorably captured in his other most famous one-liner: *Sembrar el petróleo*, "sow the oil" (Hellinger and Spanakos 7-8).

In his collection of essays, *Letras y Hombres de Venezuela*, Pietri reflects on Venezuela's place in the literary world from a position at Columbia University in New York City. By this point in his life in 1948, he had already served for many years as a public servant in Venezuela, including as the minister of education between 1939 and 1941. Like Carpentier, his own magical realist stories, as well as his advancing political career, emerged in the shadow of a long-time dictator, in this case Juan Vincente Gómez, who died in 1935 (Rodriguez). Unlike Carpentier, however, Pietri frames his engagement with literary history not as a dedicated act of resistance, but as a practice he took up while compelled to flee from violence in Venezuela's political arena. Pietri explains this as follows, as he reflects on a Venezuelan literary spirit:

> Por lo que a mí hace, he de decir que he vuelto a acerarme a la contemplación de ese espíritu y de sus obras en horas en que la violencia volía a encender su fuego sobre mi tierra, mientras, perseguido por la pasión política tenía que allegarme a las más claras fuentes de serenidad. (14)[31]

For Pietri, in contrast to Carpentier's revolutionary vision, literary history forms a spiritual resource for rest and recovery, as well as a place from which to gain much-needed perspective on human life—a search not for magic but the wells of serenity.[32]

Shahrazad's role in *Letras y Hombres de Venezuela* emerges as part of a history of the Venezuelan short story as a form, as well as the modern form of the novel itself. She is a transitional figure for Pietri, not as Zamora and Faris have it between Boccaccio and Quixote, but instead mapped onto a longer and more multicultural history going as far back as the book of Ruth in the Torah. In turning to short stories from premodern narrative cultures, Pietri finds his own way to the *Nights*. In these premodern periods, according to Pietri:

> Son relatos breves porque la técnica del narrador no le permitía ahondar más allá de un primer plano donde la peripecia se agota pronto, desnuda de perspectiva. Es la hora de los procedimientos ingeniosos para hilar relatos: las metamorphosis picarescas del *Asno de oro*, o la renovada noche final de Scheherezada. Ni siquiera cuando llega Boccaccio al jardín Florentino, con su poderoso ojo de mirar la vida, se llega a la novela. Hay que esperar a Cervantes y su dominio del tiempo y del espacio, y a su intuición de la condición humana y de sus contradicciones, para que nazca la novela moderna. (281)[33]

In a notably different gesture here, Pietri juxtaposes the famous Abbasid literary figure not with European literature, but with a second-century North African writer, Apuleius. One might certainly say that Pietri is simply reading this through what has by now become a standard history of the novel running from the Greek romances to Quixote, but even within that history, Pietri's positioning of the *Nights* reflects a

greater awareness of it as a pre-European narrative tradition. Nor is it simply a matter of different literary histories. For Pietri, the *realismo mágico* emerging in mid-twentieth century Venezuelan literature is much less connected to the magic of a distant "East." Instead, more like Carpentier, it lies immanently in something *criollo*. Pietri notes of Venezuelan novelists:

> Siguen siendo, en lo fundamental, criollistas, es decir, realistas de la vida criolla, pero ya no vista como elemento pintoresco, sino como la forma más próxima de lo humano. No abandonan el realismo, pero lo asocian a un lirismo objetivo, no subjetivo, como el de sus antecesores, un lirismo que es más bien intuición mágica. (269)[34]

For Pietri, *realismo mágico* lies in a way of speaking at and about home, and the home is not a broader pan-Latin American vision like Carpentier's, but rather a specifically Venezuelan one.

In comparing Carpentier and Pietri, it is tempting to characterize Pietri's magical realist vision as more nationalistic, and it is true that he does not seem to have taken Shahrazad as a particularly important figure for a pan-Latin American resistance. On the other hand, of all the Latin American writers I have mentioned so far, Pietri is also the one who seems to best understand that magical realism didn't inaugurate the relationship between Latin American literary cultures and the Arab world. This relationship is much older, and it is not simply literary. In 1963, Pietri ran for president of Venezuela. By the time of this campaign, he must have been well-versed in the Petro-politics of the global organizations emerging in the mid-twentieth-century Middle East. Unlike Borges, and even unlike Carpentier, Pietri could not afford to engage these developments in purely philosophical terms, much less in the unilateral language of an artistic manifesto, if for no other reason than that he was proposing to actually lead the country which three years earlier had joined in a historic alliance with Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia as the sole non-MENA member of OPEC. At the same time, alongside these political developments in Pietri's own lifetime, it is in his earlier act of taking shelter in the literary history of Venezuela from the political violence of Gómez's legacy that one finds the greatest awareness among magical realist writers of the historicity of South American literary relationships with the Arab world.

In this regard, while writing his literary history of Venezuela, Pietri finds a gem worthy of Borges's antiquarianism. In 1634, or perhaps early 1635, during a period of long literary silence from the "Venice" of the *indies*, a tantalizing juxtaposition surfaces as one of only a precious handful of documented mentions of *la tierra venezolana* for almost a century: *Arabia Margarita* (Pietri 29-31). Here, "Margarita," which is an island off the northern coast of Venezuela, refers by synecdoche to the mainland as well, and thus this mention represents, in this seventeenth-century colonial context, what is possibly the oldest juxtaposition of the Arab world and Latin America within a literary frame. This literary context, in turn, opens onto a much longer colonial history. The phrase *arabia Margarita* occurs in a poem called *Felicio*,

one of the last poems written by one of the greatest Spanish poets, Lope de Vega. The poem is a eulogy for de Vega's son Felix, who perished while fishing for pearls near Margarita:

> Iba Felicio, ¡ay cielos!, embarcado
> en un ligero leño
> infausta cama a su postrero sueño,
> a más feliz que Arabia Margarita ("Felicio" 245-48)[35]

As Christian Giaffreda aptly recalls in his commentary on the passage, in Greek and imperial Roman authors part of the Arabian peninsula was called *arabia felix*, largely because, like so much of Venezuela, it was green and promising (370).[36] Thus, in Pietri's acknowledgment of de Vega's touching memorial, we have a succinct epitome of two promises of treasure, one from the Orient and one from the *indies*, as well as an example of how the two were connected in a colonial literary imagination that predates magical realism by some three hundred years. In this light, Pietri emerges, paradoxically, as both the least interested in magical realism and the "East" as resources for pan-Latin postcolonial resistance, and at the same time, the writer most aware of the long colonial legacy that connects Venezuela to the Arab world through the specific materiality of natural resources in common: first, pearls and gold in the seventeenth century of de Vega's Felicio; and, eventually, the black gold of oil.

If you had asked me as a teenager what connected my mother's Venezuelan culture to the Arab world, I would have said oil long before I thought of Shahrazad. Such an answer, of course, reflects a distinctively North American childhood in which the second Gulf War played a greater role than the second journey of Sindbad. Nevertheless, this small piece of my own reception history speaks to the complex ways that broad cultural patterns, wide political avenues, technology, and specific lived realities of reception weave together in human lives in ways that are difficult to fully explain, even when one is the person who has lived them. Perhaps this was true for a man like Pietri as well, a person whose artistic and political legacy lies largely forgotten on the international stage amidst ongoing humanitarian crises, intentionally fueled religious wars, and the waste of another Narco-state, tragic threads that continue to connect Sanaa and Caracas, capitals once called *felix*.

But it would be wrong to end this essay on a tragic note, for the *Nights* are without question a *felix* text. Instead, I will say this. I remember holding a copy of the MacNaghten edition in my hands at the New York Public Library while researching this piece. It is in rough shape. I recall carefully lifting the pages and watching them gently fall into place. I had been reading about MacNaghten that day as well and trying to make sense of how this celebrated edition of the Nights emerged from the moral catastrophe of British colonialism. As it turns out, the story, which is too long to tell here, involves an invasion of Afghanistan. Of course, this made me think about the tragedies of my own country's "longest war," which had only just ended. I

put the book down and thought about all the people I know who love it. I brought as many of their faces to mind as I could. I also thought about how many conflicts, how many missed connections, how many meanings of "us" these stories have endured. I can't describe what it felt like exactly, but I do remember the weight of the book in my hands. In telling you this, have I too succumbed to the *Nights*' spell? Which spell is that? I think now of my grandmother in Caracas, whose life left her little time to read, but who cherished a copy of *Las mil y una noches* on her shelf and spoke often to my mother about Shahrazad's stories. My mom was more interested in architecture, but here I am. Thinking of all this, how can I but praise Shahrazad's enormous wings?

Notes

1. I would like to thank Anna Akasoy and Hassan Eddahabi for their feedback on this article, as well as Lieselot De Taeye, Justyna Poray-Wybranowska, Agata Mergler, and the editors of *CRCL/RCLC*. I would also like to thank the Mediterranean Seminar for the opportunity to workshop an aspect of this project, the MARLI program at the New York Public Library, Tom Kingsley, and the students of my reception studies seminar at Saint Ann's School: Jack Kramer, Sofia Rodriguez-Tucker, and Bijah LaFollette.

2. For work on Borges, see Cala; Ferrín; Spivakovsky; Kushigian 19-42; Ramírez del Rio; Levine; Waisman, and Fishburn.

3. "What is beyond doubt is that within the whole contemporary Iberoamerican world, but above all in the Americas, the *Nights* have been received as a classic of universal literature, bound to be included in even the strictest canons." In this article, for languages other than English, I offer and cite standard published English translations when available, occasionally with slight modifications. Otherwise, translations are my own.

4. See *The Thousand and One Nights and Twentieth-Century Fiction: Intertextual Readings*.

5. In this article, I use the term "orientalism" in an inclusive sense that refers to a set of overlapping realities including the historical interest in the orient by both Latin American and North American peoples, the historical academic discipline of orientalism, and the politically and ethically charged pejorative meaning, which became, after Said, the most common meaning of the term in English-language contexts. For a recent reappraisal of the "profound ambiguity" of the term, see Hallaq (1-8).

6. See "Avant" (2021); "Which Languages?" (2013); "Jorge Ahmad" (2012); and "Postcolonial" (2002).

7. See Akasoy et al.

8. See Catlos and Kinoshita.

9. For Borges as a magical realist writer, see Menton.

10. For the title, see Borges, *Siete Noches*.

11. "The idea of infinity is consubstantial with the *Thousand and One Nights*" (Weinberger 46).

12. "We see how marvelous the world is and how interconnected things are" (Weinberger 54).

13. For "La Busca de Averroes," see *Obras Completas*, vol. 1, 1031-36. For Renan's legacy, see Marenbon. For Averroes and the *Poetics*, see Butterworth. Also see Hassan, *Thou Shalt* 45 n.6 (translator's note).

14. "I felt that Averroes, trying to imagine what a play is without ever having suspected what a theater is, was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroes with no more material than a few snatches

from Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios. I felt, on the last page, that my story was a symbol of the man I had been as I was writing it, and that in order to write that story I had had to be that man, and that in order to be that man, I had had to write that story, and so on, infinitely" (translation slightly modified from Hurley 77-78).

15. "A major event in the history of the West was the discovery of the East. It would be more precise to speak of a continuing consciousness of the East, comparable to the presence of Persia in Greek history. Within this general consciousness of the Orient—something vast, immobile, magnificent, incomprehensible—there were certain high points, and I would like to mention a few. This seems to me the best approach to a subject I love so much, one I have loved since childhood, *The Book of the Thousand and One Nights*…" (Weinberger 42).

16. "I want to pause over the title" (Weinberger 45).

17. "At home I have the seventeen volumes of Burton's version. I know I'll never read all of them, but I know that there the nights are waiting for me; that my life may be wretched but the seventeen volumes will be there; there will be that species of eternity, *The Thousand and One Nights of the Orient*" (Weinberger 50).

18. For Diyab, see the introduction by Johannes Stephan in Diyab.

19. For Sadan, see Marzolph (xxiii-xxvii); al-Musawi, especially 1-19; Akasoy, *Crosspollinations*, especially James E. Montgomery's chapter "Islamic Crosspollinations" (148-93); Mahdi, "Muqaddama" ٢٧–٢٨.

20. "Let the reader rest assured. He will not die because of the *Nights*, for even if he wanted to read the whole thing, he could never reach the end of this book, so widely disseminated, such a body of numberless manuscripts, editions, translations, additions, interpretations, and adaptations. There will always be another *Nights* to discover and read. The superstition dispels in the meandering of a book that has been considered—and justly so—infinite."

21. "Even so, let us assume, because it suits my purpose to do so, that the *Nights* is in fact the first book that I read. What can I now make of still another claim—namely, that I liked it. Really? A formidable question indeed, for who on earth would dare state the opposite today? Who would one take me for if I were to declare that I found it merely mediocre? In fact, I cannot truly affirm anything; I cannot even say that I read it. I certainly held it in my hands (the Beirut edition, duly expurgated, yet nicely presented), but I haven't the slightest recollection of any sense of amazement at this or that story. Perhaps I was not even able to read at that time. After all, reading stories demands not only a knowledge of the language, but also the acquisition of a certain number of narrative codes" (Sryfi and Selling 116-17).

22. "The *Nights* is a book so vast that it is not necessary to have read it, for it is a part of our memory" (Weinberger 57).

23. "I discovered fantasy and eroticism in *One Thousand and One Nights*, which I read in Lebanon at age fourteen. At that time and in that place, girls didn't have much social life aside from school and family; we didn't even go to the movies. My only escape from a troublesome family life was reading. My stepfather had four mysterious leather volumes in his locked closet, forbidden books that I was not supposed to see because they were "erotic." Of course I found a way to copy the key and get in the closet when he was not around. I used a flashlight, could not mark the pages, and read quickly, skipping pages and looking for the dirty parts. My hormones were raging and my imagination went wild with those fantastic tales. When critics call me a Latin American Scheherazade I feel very flattered!" (translation from isabelallende.com/en/interview).

24. "Arab stories are one of the greatest stamps of the Arab people. Their imagination has created them and their sensibility has nourished them. Such stories spread among Arabs before and after the arrival of Islam, transmitted by both rural and cosmopolitan communities. They then spread to nations beyond the Arabs until these stories' circulation left an impression on people's worldviews, and non-Arab speakers not only transmitted the stories, but also had their hearts melted and their minds

enchanted by them. In this respect, there is no book that brings together a set of stories and tales that resembles the stories and tales brought together in this book. Likewise, no other book preserves what is preserved in this book either among Arabs or non-Arabs. Storytellers transmitted this book in global cities, and among cosmopolitan people the book became a household name for late-night listening. It provided rest and recreation to craftsmen and traders in their free time after work. A written version was eventually disseminated and through it the stories were translated into both eastern and western languages."

25. See Horta.

26. For a sobering account of the myths surrounding this search for and eventual discovery of oil, see Vitalis.

27. The most influential text here is Zamora and Faris, which extended the frame for magical realism from Latin America to global postcolonial literature. For another influential, often cited statement, see Bhabha (7).

28. For the article in *Foreign Affairs*, see Fuguet. For the *Newsweek* piece, see "Is Magical Realism Dead?"

29. "It was very hard for me to learn how to read. It did not seem logical for the letter m to be called *em*, and yet with some vowel following it you did not say *ema* but *ma*. It was impossible for me to read that way. At last, when I went to the Montessori school, the teacher did not teach me the names of the consonants but their sounds. In this way I could read the first book I found in a dusty chest in the storeroom of the house. It was tattered and incomplete, but it involved me in so intense a way that Sara's fiancé had a terrifying premonition as he walked by: 'Damn! This kid's going to be a writer!'" (Grossman 95).

30. "my friend since our first recess, and my infallible physician for Monday hangovers" (Grossmann 95).

31. "At least for my own sake, I have to say I have returned to reflecting upon that [Venezuelan] spirit and its works in hours in which violence returned to light its fires in my country. While persecuted by political passions, I had to get closer to the clear springs of serenity."

32. For an introduction to Pietri's politics, see Romero.

33. "The stories are short because narrative technique didn't allow for plumbing beyond a first plane of events, where the action is quickly exhausted and naked of point of view. After this period comes the time of ingenious developments in the spinning of tales: the picaresque metamorphoses of *The Golden Ass*, or the ever-renewing final night of Shahrazad. Not even when Boccaccio arrives at his Florentine garden with his powerful eye for observing life does the novel arrive. For the birth of the modern novel, one must await Cervantes and his mastery of space and time, as well as his intuition for the human condition and its contradictions."

34. "They continue to be, fundamentally, *criollistas*, that is, realists of *criollo* life, though no longer seen as something picturesque, but rather as the closest approximation to the form of the human being. They are not abandoning realism, but they associate it with an objective lyricism, rather than a subjective one, like the one their ancestors used, which might more properly be called a magical intuition."

35. "Felix set off, oh heavens,
On just a bit of wood,
An unlucky bed for a last dream,
Bound for Margarita, a land more green
Than lucky Yemen" (Giaffreda 369-70).

36. Marquez still refers to "arabia feliz" in *Vivir para contarla* (462).

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