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American Quarterly, Volume 63, Number 4, December 2011, pp. 895-928
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/aq.2011.0061](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2011.0061)



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Desiring the Big Bad Blade: Racing the Sheikh in Desert Romances

Amira Jarmakani

Cultural fantasy does not evade but confronts history.

— Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*

In a relatively small but nevertheless significant subgenre of romance novels,¹ one may encounter a seemingly unlikely object of erotic attachment, a sheikh, sultan, or desert prince hero who almost always couples with a white western woman.² In the realm of mass-market romance novels, a booming industry, the sheikh-hero of any standard desert romance is but one of the many possible alpha-male heroes, and while he is certainly not the most popular alpha-male hero in the contemporary market, he maintains a niche and even has a couple of blogs and an informative Web site devoted especially to him.³ Given popular perceptions of the Middle East as a threatening and oppressive place for women, it is perhaps not surprising that the heroine in a popular desert romance, *Burning Love*, characterizes her sheikh thusly: “Sharif was an Arab. To him every woman was a slave, including her. He was a lawless barbarian.”⁴ Even if expected, though, such uncomfortable facts about her love interest lead the heroine to struggle against her own attraction to him and to subsequently swear: “I’ll be damned if [he’ll] hoist *me* on [his] big bad blade again!”⁵

These revelations, of course, set up the erotic tension that structures the narrative arc of the story; the author will spend the rest of the novel working to convince the heroine and, through her, the reader that her understanding of Sharif had been based on a misunderstanding. Though the notion of Arabs in general as “lawless barbarians” who enslave women will not be dispelled, Sharif, in particular, will be revealed as a powerful and sexy male specimen who can be tamed only by the heroine. His Middle Eastern background, though safely resolved by the novel’s end, nevertheless is a constant reserve for his erotic potential. Enter the “big, bad blade.” As a somewhat clumsy euphemism for his penis, the reference to Sharif’s big, bad blade actually illustrates a complex

interplay of race and sexuality in constructing the sheikh as an erotic alpha-male hero. The blade itself evokes a quite literal, if sheathed, reference to a sword or scimitar, props that romance writers often use to simultaneously mark the sheikh as ethnically/racially different as well as aggressive and powerful.⁶ Further, the conflation of dark and dangerous, signifying a conflation of race and violence, in the sheikh's eroticized sexuality functions according to long-standing U.S. racial logics that simultaneously uphold and disavow the links between race and sexuality.⁷

To some extent, these links can be seen in the romance genre as a whole. This is not to say that there is a plethora of nonwhite heroes in mass-market romances; in fact, a common complaint among romance readers is the lack of "minorities" in romance and, in particular, of multiracial romances.⁸ However, because the most common type of hero is an alpha male—that is, a strong, hard, dominant and/or aggressive, confident man with a tender spot that the heroine uncovers⁹—authors sometimes use exotic tropes to give the hero his hard edges. In constructing the figure of the Latin lover, for instance, authors can mobilize mainstream assumptions about machismo to signify alpha maleness. In Native American heroes, romance authors can mobilize the fierce warrior stereotype to make him alpha and draw on typical "noble savage" associations to craft his sensitive side for the heroine.¹⁰

Desert romances fall roughly into this group of exoticized romance heroes,¹¹ a group that notably excludes the black hero. Far from being part of the racial landscape of mainstream romance novels, black heroes can be found almost exclusively in African American category romance, published by presses like Kimani, an imprint of Harlequin, or Arabesque, also an imprint of Harlequin. The persistence of what seems to be a separate but equal clause in mass-market romances speaks powerfully to both the unspoken presence of racial ideologies in the romance genre and the lingering potency of stereotypes about violent black masculinity. The balance between fantasy and reality that romance authors must strike manifests tellingly when it comes to race; nonwhite characters are either segregated or contained through various devices, while race appears in phantasmic ways. More often than not, authors use the "chromatic associations" of darkness and blackness in describing racially white heroes,¹² thereby incorporating metaphors that are deeply embedded in racial logics of the global North. In romance novels, then, the logics of racialization are often subsumed to those of eroticization, since race cannot usually be overtly coded, which is ironically what makes them such rich objects of study. They speak directly about the construction of race, gender, sexuality, religion, nation, and civilization even as they claim to be universal and color-blind fantasy stories.

In focusing on representations of the sheikh-hero, I chart the discursive construction of race in relation to Arabs and Muslims or, more generally, Middle Easterners. The figure of the sheikh is, in some ways, perfect for such an inquiry, since his characterization mimics the conflation and confusion of ethnic (Arab), religious (Muslim), and geographic (Middle Eastern) markers that construct Arabs/Muslims/Middle Easterners as a group in the United States. Desert romances are overwhelmingly set in fictionalized Arabia, with most novels set in a country invented by the author; perhaps this liberty also emboldens the authors to confuse and combine references to the Gulf region, North Africa, Bedouins, Berbers, Arabic (the language), Iran, and Turkey.

Though to some extent these kinds of conflations have characterized mainstream U.S. understandings of the Middle East since at least the nineteenth century, the configuration of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Easterner in the particular contexts of the war on terrorism (under presidents Ronald Reagan, George Bush Sr., and Bill Clinton) and the war on terror (under presidents George Bush Jr. and Barack Obama) has shifted in critical ways; it highlights religion (Islam) while invoking a racial paradigm of cultural/civilizational difference. Put simply, the logic of racialization applies to Arabs, Muslims, and anyone perceived as such in the United States in newly visible ways. Following this shift, Arab American studies has taken the movement from discourses of invisibility to hypervisibility as a critical point of inquiry. From Therese Saliba's "Resisting Invisibility," Nadine Naber's "Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility," and Helen Samhan's "Not Quite White," to Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race," Louise Cankar's *Homeland Insecurity*, and the collection of essays *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, edited by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, scholars have been concerned with a palpable transformation in how Arab Americans and Muslim Americans fit into the landscape of U.S. racial formations. These scholars have noted, in particular, the increasing racialization of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans since at least the 1965 Immigration Act, after which a greater number of Arabs and Muslims were able to immigrate to the United States.

While these material considerations are crucial to analyses of Arab/Muslim Americans and race, an equally compelling, and relatively unexplored, area of inquiry is the role of representation in the racial formations of Arab/Muslim Americans. Such scholars as Evelyn Alsultany and Edward Said have analyzed the shifting racialization of Arabs and Muslims in popular (television drama and news media) representations;¹³ here I build on their scholarship by demonstrating the racialization of representational Arabs and Muslims through

characteristics that had previously been understood as ethnic, religious, or regional.

In doing so, I take aim at the notion of race as a discrete category, sometimes employed even in intersectional analyses, and instead posit it as a partial, diffuse, and porous category, shot through with the residual constructions of ethnicity, sexuality, religion, culture, and civilization (to name a few). While some scholars have offered alternatives to the intersectionality paradigm, such as “assemblage” and “categorical miscegenation,”¹⁴ I offer the metaphor of radiation as a way to think about race vis-à-vis Arabs and Muslims in the United States. As several desert romance plots reveal,¹⁵ the Middle East is popularly associated with the radiation involved in nuclear enrichment—the “bad guys” in both contemporary mainstream news media and in many desert romances seek to illegally find ways to enrich uranium and make nuclear weapons.

This way to construct a clear enemy aids in racializing that enemy; features that may or may not logically cohere a group (e.g., geographic location in the case of Iran and Iraq) nevertheless construct that group within the same racial formation for a U.S. audience. On a metaphoric level, radiation suggests how racial logics can silently and invisibly permeate ethnic, religious, and cultural categories in potentially deadly ways (taken to its extreme in the cases of murdered Arabs, Muslims, and Sikhs in the aftermath of 9/11). While it can operate in silent and invisible ways, though, it nevertheless has material effects. The failure of various nuclear reactors (most recently in Japan) has unfortunately demonstrated that radiation permeates much larger areas than often admitted or acknowledged, and though its presence may be very real, its effects are often not evident until long after the first exposure. Precisely because the effects of exposure can be so hard to chart, I look in what seems to be the unlikeliest of places: fantasy stories that have an invested interest in downplaying race. To put the metaphor to use in another way, then, I give an X-ray reading of desert romances, outlining the skeleton of racial logic on which the flesh of the story hangs.

Despite the old adage, the book covers of popular desert romances reveal some interesting things about the way the sheikh is coded for popular consumption. Among contemporary mass-market romances, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing to the present, the book covers demonstrate a remarkable inversion of how Arab and Muslim men have been racialized in the United States. Whereas early desert romances utilize the exoticized marker of the *kuffiyeh* or *ghutrah* and *igal*—colloquially known as a “headdress”—to adorn the sheikh on the cover,¹⁶ recent romances, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, are careful to represent the sheikh as abstractly Mediterranean with no

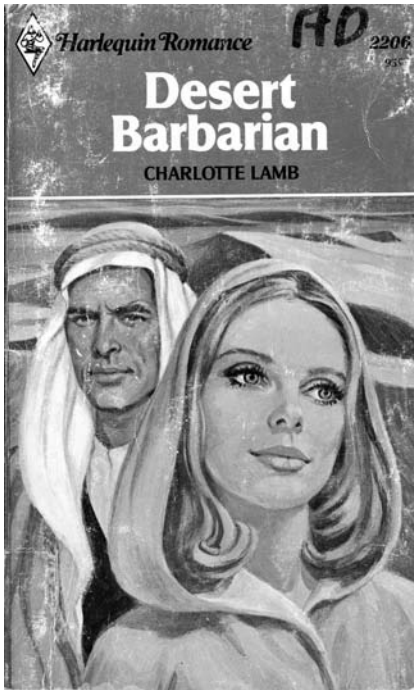


Figure 1. Charlotte Lamb, *Desert Barbarian*. New York: Harlequin, 1978. Reprinted with permission from Harlequin.



Figure 2. Linda Conrad, *Secret Agent Sheikh*. New York: Harlequin, 2011. Reprinted with permission from Harlequin.

clear markers of his connection to “Arabia.” The transition to the unmarked Mediterranean sheikh-hero on the cover highlights a distinctive feature of the romance novel genre; the narratives must negotiate a delicate balance between fantasy and (perceived) reality. By displaying the sheikh-hero in a *ghutra*, the earlier desert romance novel covers emphasize cultural markers that clearly identify the sheikh as exotic other; at the same time, they reference the filmic representation of “Lawrence of Arabia,”¹⁷ an object of fantasy for fans of the desert romance.

In the context of the 1970s and 1980s, the Lawrence of Arabia fantasy seems to have been a prominent enough association with the Middle East that there was no danger of readers connecting the sheikh-hero with the unpleasant political realities of U.S. engagement in the region. However, at least since 2001, when swarthy men in headdresses call up a much more disturbing association with the Middle East for mainstream readers, romance novel covers avoid such

overt references to the sheikh-hero's otherness, in what seems to be an effort to protect readers from too much reality. In this complex dialectic between fantasy and reality lies an interesting commentary about the racialization of the sheikh, which, in turn, implies a shift in the racialization of Arabs and Muslims in the United States.

A close analysis of (both positive and negative) engagements with desert romances online coupled with a textual analysis of some of the novels demonstrates that an inversion in overt representations of ethnic and religious markers for fictional sheikhs ironically signals a shift toward the more overt racialization of actual Arabs and Muslims in the United States. Since (overt) discussions of race are generally irreconcilable with fantasy in romancelandia, the disappearance of the sheikh's headdress on the covers of desert romances suggests its transformation from a widely perceived ethnic marker to a widely perceived racial marker.¹⁸

Interestingly, one of the only book covers to display a sheikh in a *ghutra* and *igal* after 2001 is *Delaney's Desert Sheikh*, the only desert romance to feature an African American heroine.¹⁹ Like the vast majority of white heroines in desert romances, Delaney is drawn to Sheikh Jamal's "native Arab garb," but she is also attracted to the "rich-caramel coloring of his skin, giving true meaning to the description of tall, dark, and handsome."²⁰ The attention to a phenotypical description of skin color, replicated in a scene in which Jamal imagines the "dark, copper-colored skin, head of jet-black curls, and dark chocolate colored eyes" of his future son,²¹ is virtually nonexistent in most desert romances, particularly in novels from the last decade, a detail that highlights the complex relationship between popular notions of race and the fantasy world of the novel. In the racially stratified world of romance novels, the representation of Jamal's headdress on the cover of *Delaney's Desert Sheikh* parallels the interior description of him as a man of color to eroticize him for the intended audience. On the contrary, though the sheikh character has a long history of commodification in the United States, what makes him consumable for a mainstream white audience in the post-9/11 context is a submersion of overt racial markers, precisely because actual Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. landscape are irradiated with racial logics in newly intense and legible ways. What were previously employed as exoticizing ethnic, religious, or cultural markers of the sheikh's desirability now glow with the potential threat of racial overtones.

I do not wish to imply that racialization is a new phenomenon for Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, as if there had been a clear, distinct switch from the paradigm of ethnicity to that of race in the last decade. On the con-

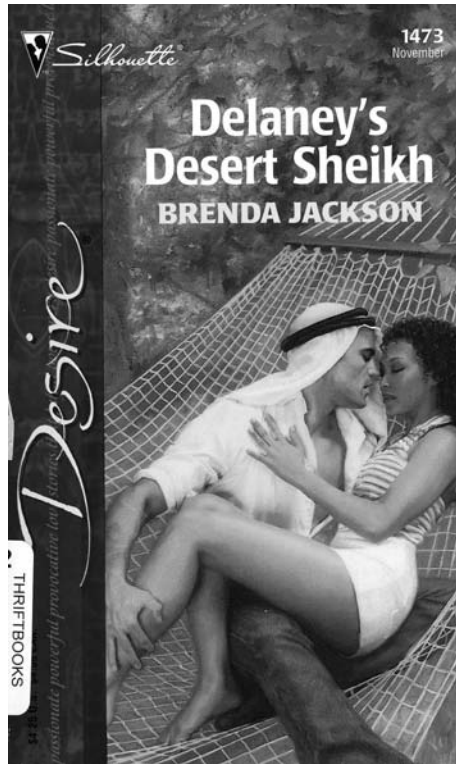


Figure 3.
Brenda Jackson, *Delaney's Desert Sheikh*.
New York: Silhouette, 2002. Reprinted
with permission from Harlequin.

trary, race has functioned as a submerged logic in the construction of Arab Americans in particular since the first wave of immigration in the late 1800s.²² Nevertheless, I do

chart the increased salience of the concept of race to the construction of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, noting how more recent configurations of the group operate in more overtly racialized ways. Underlying all of this are two basic ideas laid out by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their landmark book *Racial Formations in the United States*: (1) that race presents itself as an immutable, fixed, and natural characteristic, despite being a socio-historical concept; and (2) that racialization is a historically specific ideological process, which sometimes “extends racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.”²³ The first point serves as a reminder of the persistent recourse to the natural and essential (or, especially in scientific iterations, the biological) in discourses of race;²⁴ the second point highlights how organizing elements like ethnicity, religion, or geopolitical configurations

can become racialized while noting that a set of political investments generally aids such a process.

There is no easy or shorthand way to refer to the racialization of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, which helps further elucidate the above two points. In reality, one must speak of the racialization of Arabs, Muslims, and anyone appearing to be Arab or Muslim in the United States. That last clause, the hardest aspect of this particular racial formation to signify in a neat phrase, suggests, again, that “common-sense” notions of race fall back on vague assignments of “type and descent” and tend to (or try to) naturalize a cultural grouping.²⁵ In this respect, it seems to follow Paul Gilroy’s suggestion that race contemporarily functions according to “culture lines rather than color lines.”²⁶

At the same time, one can hardly speak of Arabs, Muslims, South Asians, Iranians, and anyone appearing to be any of the above as one *cultural* group, proving that racial notions are rooted in ideological processes, in this case in a political investment that constructs a disparate group formation, which some scholars refer to as Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim,²⁷ as enemies of the state. Here it is clear that ethnicity and race are not mutually exclusive, as race serves to contain and/or manage ethnic and religious identities. Race is a famously unstable concept, which often uses a variety of categorizations in its service. Siobhan Somerville has noted, for instance, that “in 19th-century scientific usage, [race] might refer to groupings based variously on geography, religion, class, or color.”²⁸ In the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern configuration, it is precisely such kinds of groupings that are at play—the configuration seems to refer at once to ethnicity, religion, and geopolitical territory—implying that the conflation of these kinds of groupings is itself a characteristic of the concept and functioning of race. I refer here to its fluidity and its flexibility, in terms of both space and time. Though I focus on modern notions of race, it must be noted that contemporary constructions of Arabs/Muslims/Middle Easterners seem to incorporate atavistic, protoracial formations of the Muslim other, rendered through narratives of the Crusades, and especially the Inquisition and the Reconquista in the Iberian peninsula.²⁹

Given its fungibility, I work from a definition of race suggested by Winant in *The New Politics of Race*: “Race is a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of bodies.”³⁰ This definition offers two points of departure—one related to bodies and one related to architecture. Though some phenotypical characteristics, like dark skin or a long beard, certainly play a role in racializing Arabs and Muslims in the United States, one must also take “bodies” to include notions of bodies that understand their embodiment to be shaped by racially marked, habitually

worn sartorial items (like a hijab³¹ or turban) as well as habitually performed movements (like *salaat*, the Muslim practice of praying five times a day).

The example of the Sikh turban brings together several elements of racialization I have sought to delineate. Being neither Arab nor Muslim nor Middle Eastern, Sikh men inhabit the often unstated clause of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern formation—they are those appearing to be such (according to mainstream perceptions) based partly on a racially marked, habitually worn, item of clothing. Likely assigned to the vague term *headdress* by popular U.S. imagination, the racialization of (and violence against) Sikh men in the United States after 9/11 also points to the particular architecture of this racial logic—it is designed and built on U.S. military conflict, the “war on terror,” and the construction of the enemy of the state par excellence—the terrorist. While a discussion of the construction of the term *terrorist* and the uses to which it has been put is outside the scope of this article, the point is that it serves as a way to systematize a whole set of state policies—classification, surveillance, strategies of punishment and detention, and distribution of resources—that are meted out along racial lines;³² in this case, it also codifies the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern configuration through the specter of the terrorist, as a racial formation.

Rather than entirely new, this racial formation constructs peoples with ancestry in the SWANA (South and West Asia and North Africa) region in newly legible ways. As Melani McAlister points out in *Epic Encounters*, the Middle East has figured in U.S. national mythologies in various ways. These mythologies, in turn, configure race differently from one another. In identifications with the “Holy Land” as an origin of “Western civilization,” popular in the late nineteenth century and into the turn of the century³³ and then again in the post–World War II period³⁴ (though never fully receding),³⁵ peoples of the Middle East tend to be relegated to atavistic elements of the landscape. Insofar as the Middle East has played the representational role of the other in the U.S. progress narrative (e.g., in the belly dance exhibitions at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, which demonstrated U.S. progress and prowess, in part, against the ethnographic/spectacular exhibits of others),³⁶ peoples of the Middle East have often been assigned a quaint, atavistic, or timeless status.

Even in representations that provoke—such as belly dancing at the fair, which both attracted and repulsed viewers because of its flouting of Victorian ideals of white femininity—the Middle East appeared distant and containable, able to be inspected and gazed on, but ultimately controlled. In a third type of U.S. discourse, that of national security, the Middle East figures in both material and representational ways, both of which construct Middle Easterners, and especially Arab Americans and Muslim Americans, as a threatening pres-

ence.³⁷ Though this discourse obviously incorporates the figure of the terrorist as primary enemy of state in the contemporary context, it is also imbricated in the idea that access to natural resources (such as oil) is a primary concern of national security. It is this configuration that turns Arabs and Muslims toward a threatening presence formation, beginning at least with the 1973 oil embargo and accelerating into the Reagan/Bush/Clinton-era war on terrorism as well as the Bush/Obama war on terror. As an object of state regulation and surveillance in newly highlighted ways, particularly after the events of September 11, the figure of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/terrorist is therefore more overtly subjected to a political, ideological, and systemic form of racial classification.

The character as a—broadly conceived—fits into this landscape in multiple ways.³⁸ In romance novels, he portrays both noble savage and violent, primitive other (in the form of the antihero) of the progress narrative. He is the wealthy, dashing sheikh of his own oil-rich kingdom and the rich, greedy oil sheikh of the 1973 oil embargo,³⁹ both incarnations of the national security discourse. One could even argue that the way the desert is constructed through tropes of freedom in the novels draws on the mythology of the U.S. relationship to the Holy Land. However, the figure of the sheikh has been rendered most overtly through his signification of a particularly aggressive and eroticized sexuality, where, as noted earlier, his sexuality depends on a clear link between eroticism and an ethnicity containing a liminal racial logic.⁴⁰ Such liminality, in turn, allows romance writers to negotiate a fine line between fantasy and reality; the sheikh-hero evades the threat of racial identification (as race would destroy the fantasy) through inscription (or escape) into the ethnic/erotic realm and through simultaneous submersion of markers of race.

I trace the way ethnic inscription and racial submersion function through an analysis of two discursive realms. In the first realm, posts and discussions on popular romance novel blogs, readers cannot get past the (raced) realities of the sheikh-hero to fall in love with him. Here, then, I chart the failed submersion of racial logic for some (potential) readers of desert romances, noting in particular how they characterize this as a new phenomenon. In the second realm, I analyze desert romances themselves to demonstrate how they submerge race to ethnicity to successfully interpellate readers into the world of fantasy.

The Sheikh: Fantasy or Reality?

Romance novels are widely considered to be escapist fiction, offering readers reprieve from their own unexciting, everyday realities. Many readers confirm such an assumption on popular blogs and message boards devoted to the genre.

Perhaps this is why both readers and writers of the desert romance deny any relationship between its popularity and the resurgence of the war on terror, despite the fact that desert romance publication has remained steady, if not elevated, since 2001. As some of the respondents to “The Unshakeable Appeal of the Sheikh Hero” say: “I never even thought about the current problems in the MidEast (“terrorism,” theocracy, etc.) in relation to my absolute obsession with Sheikhs. . . . I think my love for Sheikhs is because of their ‘alpha maleness’ as it is described,” and “I don’t think about 911 [*sic*] when reading sheikhs.”⁴¹ Trish Morey, author of *Stolen by the Sheikh* and *The Sheikh’s Convenient Virgin*, puts it perhaps less pointedly, but more helpfully as she contextualizes the claim of distance from current political events: “I just love the escapism and sheer fantasy of the sheikh story. I think EM Hull got it so right when she penned her famous ‘The Sheik’ about a century ago. Being whisked away by the king of the desert is a theme that resonates with women all over.”⁴² Here Morey makes a point related to “escapism and sheer fantasy” that is key to the popular narrative of the sheikh-hero and to romance novels in general.

While romance novel enthusiasts are quick to point out that romance novels are not only about escapism, when the novels tread too closely to the “real” world, readers and writers carefully guard fiction’s escapist element. After all, they reason, they can (and must) engage with “real world” drudgery every day, which is why they turn to fantasy in the first place. Therefore, as Janice Radway has pointed out and as readers will confirm, romance novels actually demonstrate a complex interplay between notions of fantasy and reality.⁴³ Radway argues that romance readers expect to learn some “real” historical and geographic facts, even if the romance story itself is fictional, and, indeed, authors’ relative success at incorporating historical and cultural research into their novels is often a topic for discussion among readers. The tension between readers’ expectations around the balance between fantasy and reality often surfaces in relation to a popular debate among romance readers about the function of rape and rape fantasy (as well as the difference between the two) in romance novels. In one online discussion, to which I return below, one reader expresses the desire “to talk about issues of historical accuracy and authenticity in ways that allow us to confront the place we want more realism.”⁴⁴ While this reader is interested in acknowledging the contingencies of “reality” within romance fiction, though, her interlocutors seem to reify a vague, commonsense notion of the line between fantasy and reality. Most readers (in this thread) insist that reality in the story does not work when it “hits too close to home” and forecloses the possibility for fantasy, while relatively few are interested in exploring the shared cultural assumptions and sociopolitical realities that make some details more unbearably “real” than others.

Of course, it is precisely in the unspoken and subtle negotiations between fantasy and reality that romance novels do some of their most important cultural work, since, as Geraldine Heng suggests, the genre of romance can provide a safe venue in which to explore larger cultural transformations.⁴⁵ Particularly since desert romances both enjoy a long history and maintain their popularity despite the demonization of Arab/Muslim masculinity during the war on terror, they offer a set of materials through which to analyze the shifts in racialization of Arabs and Muslims. As Heng notes: “Race itself, after all, is a fantasy with fully material effects and consequences.”⁴⁶ Since romance novels are famous for eliding considerations of race, presenting themselves instead as universal love stories, they provide in their very disavowal a complex articulation of the construction of race. Even in the desert romance subgenre, in which the exotic other is the object of fantasy, overt references to race or racialization are hard to find, since, presumably, they would touch too closely on the realities that readers want to leave behind. Rather, covert articulations of race, sometimes coded through the tropes of ethnicity or region, play a vital role in exoticizing and eroticizing the hero.

In online conversations about the popularity of desert romances, readers theorize distance and/or ignorance as factors that would enable someone to fantasize about the sheikh without allowing reality to get in the way. True to readers’ and Morey’s claims about the “sheer fantasy” of the sheikh-hero, desert romances almost always animate orientalist representations of Arab masculinity as aggressive and powerful—the sheikh is a “fierce desert man,” as E. M. Hull put it.⁴⁷ While the novels themselves frequently make reference to *Arabian Nights*, readers commenting in sheikh blog forums name “berobed desert sheiks” as well as “hot desert winds, cool fountains, slight and slithery silk garments, unusually juicy fruit, [and an] attar of roses” as the exotic draw of the sheikh.⁴⁸ In other words, one commenter reminded other readers, imagined distance between the reader and her setting enabled this set of fantasies: “Back then [in the 1970s] Arabia was just some mystical place ‘out there’ where men were dominant and women submissive and the clothes looked nice.”⁴⁹

Addressing the question of how these novels could remain popular even in the face of contemporary political events, they suggest that it mimics the original desert fantasy, which invoked a thrilling and exotic “mystical place” far removed from readers’ notion of reality. While this comment acknowledges the desert romance setting as one in which writers can develop the alpha male as (dominant) hero to the submissive heroine, it also implies that readers’ lack of knowledge about the Middle East is what makes “Arabia” an ideal setting. As a commenter on the Smart Bitches, Trashy Books Web site explains,

“These books only work if you have absolutely no clue whatsoever about the real culture. A 15-year-old Catholic white girl living in Indiana in 1987 just has a vague notion that somewhere way far away, there is a place with lots of sand and camels where people wear long flowing robe-like clothes and men are crazy rich and powerful and ooooh it’s all so exotic.”⁵⁰

Desert romances can operate as the uber-escape fantasy, this comment implies, because of the powerful trope of the desert as the ultimate blank slate, an almost otherworldly space, in which the heroine can indulge in erotic and exotic fantasy. The “long flowing robe-like clothes” seem to be just another semiotic marker of the desert trope, which also functions to pull the reader out of her own reality—what one Smart Bitches, Trashy Books commenter refers to as “yearning for Calgon.”⁵¹ The idea that the reader cannot indulge in the fantasy of the desert trope unless she has “absolutely no clue whatsoever about the real culture” explains the important function of sheikh fans’ disavowal of the connection to “real culture.” A response to Gwyneth Bolton’s blog states it more directly: “I wonder if the physical distance between the U.S. and the Middle East makes sheik romances more acceptable? Perhaps the reader subconsciously thinks she can read about this ‘savage’ seduction set in the Middle East while she’s safe in her suburban home?”⁵²

The sense of distance certainly does seem to be a key element of the desert romance fantasy and, indeed, has a major function in all mass-market romance. Tellingly, contributors to the blogs I have been citing continuously reference the late 1970s and the 1980s as a time in which desert romances were more viable because the illusion of absolute distance between the United States and the Middle East was still possible. The political context of the 1970s and 1980s was actually precisely the opposite—the 1973 oil embargo helped inaugurate “oil sheik” caricatures of greedy, lascivious Arab men, while the 1979 Iranian revolution and Libyan plane hijackings in the 1980s helped inaugurate the figure of the terrorist, still prominent today. Both of these figures, in their engagement with U.S. notions of national security, helped develop the notion of the Middle East as a threatening presence. However, based on these comments, they had not yet reached a level of cultural saturation to threaten the sense of distance necessary for the desert fantasy. Instantiating distance (to ultimately overcome it) is one of the main tropes of romance, which makes the question of how to construct a believable distance even more interesting.

Indeed, one of the Smart Bitches, Trashy Books contributors, “Ann Wesley Hardin,” notes the contemporary popularity of paranormal romances and muses that cultural, social, physical, and psychic/spiritual boundaries in romance novels operate (at the novel’s denouement) to ultimately demonstrate

the power of love to overcome any obstacle: “Kinda makes sense when you look at other themes like paranormal, secrets, time travel, etc. All these problems are pretty insurmountable the same way the sociocultural ones used to be. In a sense, the werewolf is the new sheik.”⁵³ While she seems to mean this literally—and without irony—the idea that sheikhs and werewolves are comparable kinds of characters, which simply have salience in different political contexts, is a telling one.⁵⁴ It demonstrates both the perceived unreality of the sheikh and his simultaneous association with monstrosity, a status all too grounded in reality for some readers. Alpha-male heroes must have a (tamable) dangerous edge, but the perceived danger must not tread too closely to the realm of reality for readers, which is why many respondents are vocal about the dislike of the sheikh. As Devon explains, “Sheiks are an area where that suspension of disbelief fails. While I am not saying that all Muslim men or men of M.E. descent are bad, I have difficulty reconciling what I know of the treatment of women in the M.E. with the desert oasis fantasy.”⁵⁵

For these readers, it is impossible to engage in a romantic fantasy about the sheikh because the Middle East’s supposed unpleasant realities are too present and too powerful. Notably, many of these comments display a conceit discussed by Leila Ahmed in her article “Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem”—they assume an authority of knowledge about the Middle East, particularly in relation to women’s status and women’s rights.⁵⁶ In “The Unshakeable Appeal of the Sheikh Hero” entry on the I [Heart] Harlequin Presents Web site, one of the respondents, “CT,” fills in some of the details about such popular “knowledge” about the Middle East. “I have to say that for me, the events of 9/11, plus other issues, among them the horrible kidnapping and abuse of Terry Anderson, the relentless suicide bombers, ‘honor’ killings and sexual mutilation of young girls, old goats taking a 4th or 5th wife who happens to be 11 or 12 years old, etc. . . . makes it almost impossible for me to think of any sheikh as a hero.”⁵⁷

CT’s list is telling in that it both references popular associations with the war on terror (i.e., “relentless suicide bombers”) and reads like a laundry list of sensationalist stories in the popular press about the “backward” customs of the Arab and Muslim worlds (i.e., “honor killings,” sexual mutilation of girls, “old goats” taking prepubescent wives). If nothing else, these comments demonstrate a clear dialectical relationship between what readers assume they know about the Middle East and their ability to engage with the novels. Moreover, at least one commenter, “Stephanie,” ties her understanding of the Middle East to the news media: “How is it possible to separate the fantasy from reality—when the reality shows up on the news nightly. Maybe back in 1980—you could over

look it, but today?"⁵⁸ Again, the invocation of 1980 underscores my general claim about the shift in overt racialization of Arabs and Muslims in the United States. Stephanie seems to suggest that in the contemporary war on terror context, the shady configuration of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/terrorist shows up on the nightly news as a distinctly identifiable racial formation, one that precludes any kind of fantasy engagement.

Despite these negative associations with the sheikh, he nevertheless seems to maintain a persistent presence within the genre as a whole. In other words, the specter of the sheikh figure is sometimes invoked, even in conversations that have nothing to do with desert romances. In what amounts to a negative presence, where the sheikh exists only as a counterpoint to some larger argument, lie more clues about racialization for the sheikh, a process that relies heavily on constructing his difference through orientalist perceptions of political events.

Smart Bitches, Ghastly Sheikhs

Continuing with a consideration of how the sheikh's overt racialization makes him untenable as a hero for many readers, I explore here his haunting presence in the genre. I begin with a reader discussion from the wildly popular romance review Web site Smart Bitches, Trashy Books. This blog has such a wide readership that it has been featured on several news programs (including NPR), and the authors of the blog have recently published a book, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, because of the success of their blog. The Smart Bitches' popularity seems to be due, at least partly, to their forthright manner in giving negative reviews to romance novels that they consider poor quality. In this way, instead of blindly defending the genre and its worth as a literary form, they lend legitimacy to the genre as a whole by distinguishing good from poor quality.

Interestingly, one of their most popular negative reviews is of a desert romance by Sharon Kendrick, *The Playboy Sheikh's Virgin Stable Girl*.⁵⁹ In fact, the Smart Bitches have little positive to say about sheikhs or desert romances. Given this, I was interested to find a veiled conversation about the Middle East and Muslims in the comments section of a long post about rape in romance. In a post called "Alphas in Marriage," Sarah SB (Smart Bitch) raises the question of whether "unwilling sex" is problematic or offensive in historical romance novels, since it is widely accepted that having sex (even if unwillingly) was a conjugal duty of women during the time period in which the novels take place. For the sake of space, I do not go into the debate about rape and coerced sex that followed; however, I do want to focus on the rhetorical strategy that some of the readers employed. In arguing that historical rape was just as

problematic as contemporary rape, they use two main strategies: the first is to compare the historical context in romance novels with contemporary cultural contexts that they view as atavistically still engaging in problematic customs. The second is to note other historical practices that are now widely condemned and considered condemnable in their own historical context as well. Both have racialized overtones.

In likening the barbarism of forced sex in historical romance novels to similarly perceived barbaric customs in the contemporary context, the first reference is to some (unspecified) other “modern country where a woman has no right to say ‘no.’”⁶⁰ However, the examples quickly become more clearly identified with what is commonly referred to as the “Muslim world.” When the above comment is misinterpreted, the poster, Angel, specifies: “Women were not the creators of these cultural mores; they were the objects of them. If we accept them, we’d have to retroactively accept the righteousness of the abuses committed against women under them. That’s as unappealing as [*sic*] prospect to me as excusing a man who commits an ‘honor killing’ because that’s part of the power his culture has given to him over the women of his family.”⁶¹

Leaving a discussion of honor killings and a U.S. fascination with them to one side, what seems clear from this statement is that the very example of “honor killings” clarifies the popular notion that Muslim “culture” represents the contemporary other who is still engaged in backward, unacceptably misogynist acts in comparison with contemporary enlightened views about women’s rights in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.⁶² This type of assumption seems to undergird much of the blog discussion and is confirmed in a later comment by Najida (who eventually reveals herself to be a white, U.S.-based belly dancer): “I’m a woman who would slap anyone who insulted me with the term ‘feminist.’ . . . Don’t get me wrong, I was and am still very active and vocal in women’s issues in Islamic states, etc. They do have it horrible, and we have little to bitch about.”⁶³ In a classic formulation, Najida here employs the common perception of how Muslim women “have it horrible” as a dichotomous counterpoint to U.S. women’s freedom and independence (key characteristics of the ideal romance novel heroine). Indeed, these sorts of views about “Islamic states” are precisely what desert romances must overcome to achieve the optimal fantasy-reality balance. Nevertheless, they remain a key, if submerged, presence in characterizing the sheikh. Most desert romances speak to these common perceptions by carefully coding the sheikh as a progressive, forward-thinking man who needs the independent, headstrong western (white) woman to help him modernize his country.⁶⁴ Even so, they run the risk of remaining unconvincing to some romance readers, like “Erin,” who explains:

I'm just too informed on current events and Middle East culture to buy into the world that book tried to set up. . . . The woman had a pretty good life, a good job, decent income, etc. Then she gets kidnapped by sheikh-dude and after getting brainwashed by his c**k of multiple orgasms, decides that she's going to give it all up to be his little woman out in the middle of the desert? Um, WTF? No mention of the likely multiple wives, her having to convert to Islam or having to wear hijab, and certainly no mention of her being stoned or the husband's right to damn near whatever he wants to do with her, legally.⁶⁵

Incidentally, nearly all of these characteristics appear in Nora Roberts's sheikh antihero novel, *Sweet Revenge* (1989), but Erin's point is well taken in that they do not operate as elements of the sheikh-hero. Her assumption that all unions in the Middle East are bound by Islam and that they involve "multiple wives," compulsory veiling, and possible stoning evidences the sheer persistence of such stereotypical notions about the Middle East; it also reinforces the idea that Middle Eastern masculinity is characterized by extreme patriarchal customs. Here the sheikh is raced through strongly held beliefs about the absolute religio-cultural differences of Middle Eastern men. Racialization works through the negative presence of such perceptions, which cast these differences as static and immutable.

The second strategy readers employ in the rape-in-marriage debate is, perhaps, a clearer articulation of how common perceptions of Islam fit into the logics of racialization in the United States. In these examples, readers rely on noting that historically racist practices directed toward African and African American peoples are not considered acceptable even in their historical context (and so neither should rape be), *and* they tie these historical examples of racism against black people to contemporary examples of misogyny in Muslim contexts. "Snarkhunter" argues: "oooookay . . . so . . . burning heretics alive is not something I should look back and judge? I should be okay with it, because it was just 'part of life'? What about apartheid? Female genital mutilation?"⁶⁶ And later, she clarifies and expands: "Is it okay to lynch African-Americans if you're a poor white person who barely scrapes by and who is on the verge of starvation? . . . Is cutting off a little girl's clitoris with a sharp rock okay because it's accepted in her culture?"⁶⁷

Here she uses clear and powerful examples of oppressive practices (that are widely understood as such) to lend credence to her overall argument. Importantly, the absolute misogyny of "female genital mutilation," which is usually cast as a Muslim cultural practice and widely assumed to be condoned within Islam, is here equated with the absolute racism of the act of lynching and the system of apartheid. In this unspoken and unacknowledged way, what are vaguely understood to be Arab and Muslim cultural practices become associated with quintessential racist practices. Though the parallel works to

suggest that these alleged Arab and Muslim cultural practices are misogynist on a comparable scale of oppression as the racist practices of lynching and apartheid by white supremacists, the analogy also racializes Arab and Muslim men through a culturally sanctioned (and even promoted) misogyny. Here I do not wish to oppose Arabs and Muslims to African Americans—they are clearly not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, I am interested in popular associations with race, the way that oppression of African Americans and black South Africans are invoked as absolute and quintessential markers of racism, and the deployment of such markers in parallel with common misperceptions about Arab and Muslim cultural practices.

Delaney's Desert Sheikh, the only desert romance to feature a black heroine, is also the only contemporary desert romance in which the sheikh-hero makes an overt reference to “Allah,” marking him clearly as Muslim.⁶⁸ While African Americans comprise approximately 40 percent of the Muslim community in the United States,⁶⁹ this is actually not the typical (even if the most obvious) way in which Islam and African Americans tend to be linked within common U.S. racial logics. Rather, as in Delaney’s case, Islam seems to operate as a form of racialization that can be coterminous or compatible with blackness. Perhaps through popular notions of Islamism and radicalization, Islam sometimes operates as a marker of radical (racial) difference.

One example of this is in the way President Obama’s middle name, Hussein, was constantly invoked in the lead-up to the 2008 elections, as a way to overlay a racialized “post-racial” candidate with a more radioactive marker of (racial) difference.⁷⁰ This is not to say that Islam is the new black,⁷¹ but that Islam is operating in the contemporary U.S. context in particularly racialized ways, some of which manifest through popular linkages to blackness and African American cultural movements, which hold privileged places within the racial logics of the United States. One final linkage, or parallel, lies in how sheikhs operate as key ghostly presences in a wider romance genre primarily focused on white characters coded as representing universal experience. Here I refer not to desert romances themselves but to how the veiled figure of the sheikh (in his terrorist incarnation) functions to regulate conversations about what should be deemed acceptable in romances, as in the above-cited conversation about rape in romance. In other words, he operates as a shadowy figure—a racial other—who enables the self-reflective focus on whiteness through the white heroine. He urges us, in Toni Morrison’s words, to “realize the obvious” about romance novels, that is, that in them “the subject of the dream is the dreamer.”⁷²

Reading the Desert Romance

Turning now to the desert romances themselves, I attend to how they both utilize and submerge racial notions. The increased salience of race as a category through which Arabs and Muslim are contemporarily understood in the United States has, as I have shown, shifted some things in the landscape of desert romances: it has made them less believable as fantasy stories for some readers, and it seems to have stripped the sheikhs of their headdresses on the covers of desert romances. The latter shift implies a larger one—that is, a shift in popular perception of Arab/Muslim as an ethnic/religious identity to a racial one. Within U.S. racial logics, ethnicity has sometimes functioned as a register of inclusion within whiteness,⁷³ while race has more often functioned as a register of exclusion from hegemonic structures. In actuality, ethnicity itself has a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion built into the imprecise nature of the category.⁷⁴ It operates as a universalist identity category on which the U.S. state founds an argument for tolerance, diversity, and acceptance while functioning as a particularist identity category on the basis of which minoritarian groups struggle for rights and justice; it often invokes the universal, neutral modality while operating in an exclusionary, boundary-marking manner. Moreover, it has, at least in its origins, a religious valence, as it served as a marker to distinguish Jew and gentile as well as Christian and heathen.⁷⁵ These various registers of the ethnic paradigm therefore indicate both the mutability and the permeability of ethnicity, religion, and race as categorical identifiers. Desert romances exploit and manipulate the flexibility among these categories in the careful crafting of a fantasy narrative.

The One-Drop Rule: Mediations between Biological and Cultural Notions of Race

E. M. Hull's original desert romance, *The Sheik*, set an interesting precedent for questions of race. Widely known for its miscegenation plot, the novel nevertheless found an intricate and clever way to negotiate the notion of race by roughly situating Sheik Ahmed between black and white. Hull makes his racialization clear by having Diana (the white heroine) assume that her brother would consider him black. Referring to the sheikh as a "man of different race and colour,"⁷⁶ Diana goes so far as to imagine that her brother would categorize him in terms of the racial epithet "damned nigger,"⁷⁷ even as the novel works to position the sheikh as ambiguously raced. At the same time that Hull emphasizes Sheik Ahmed's racial otherness, she resolves the threat of

miscegenation for her readers by revealing the sheikh's European ancestry. As Susan Blake notes in "What 'Race' Is the Sheik?" what is particularly interesting about Hull's framing of race is her mediation between biological and cultural understandings of race.⁷⁸

While miscegenation fears are allayed through a biological notion of race (Sheik Ahmed has a Spanish mother and a Scottish—earl—father), Diana's exotic desert romance maintains authenticity by virtue of the fact that she still considers Ahmed to be culturally Arab, having been raised as a future desert sheikh. Such a formulation interestingly parallels Etienne Balibar's discussion of racism in "Is There a Neo-Racism?" Though the novel predates the time period that Balibar discusses, it establishes a framework mimicked by many contemporary desert romances, which do fall within the era of "decolonization" and which therefore operate according to "a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences."⁷⁹ In other words, in a context in which colonialism (and the scientific racist projects that helped justify it) is outwardly repudiated, notions of radical difference are instantiated in the liberal-democratic "old metropolis" through the paradigm of cultural difference, a formulation echoed by Rey Chow in her description of "culturalist" or "differentialist" notions of race.⁸⁰

This is not to say that biological notions of race completely recede; rather, they emerge in different ways, such as in reference to ancestry or authenticity. Balibar specifies that the "return of the biological theme" can be neatly contained within the framework of cultural racism,⁸¹ a phenomenon that clearly correlates with conceptions of race in contemporary desert romances. While some contemporary novels (like Nan Ryan's *Burning Love*) mimic Hull's technique of revealing the sheikh-hero to hail completely from European ancestry, most of them bestow authenticity on their heroes by identifying them with some form of desert ancestry.⁸² In a move that seems to parallel the logic of the "one drop rule," sheikhs' bloodlines ensure their desert status, providing a (biological) foundation on which the culturalist racial markers of civilization and dress can build. In Emma Darcy's *Traded to the Sheikh*, for example, the sheikh-hero (Zageo) is a mix of Portuguese, Arab, Indian, British, and French. In case this conglomeration seems too diffuse, the author (through her heroine) assures readers: "He might not look like an Arab but he is one at heart."⁸³ Likewise, the sheikh in Trish Morey's *Stolen by the Sheikh* is half Arab and half French, though the heroine notes that his accent "held touches of English, a trace of American and more besides."⁸⁴ Because of his "dark features," the heroine identifies him as somehow Mediterranean. When she finally discovers his Arab roots, she reveals that "she could see the Arab influence in his features . . . as if he was made for the desert."⁸⁵

Sometimes, as in Loreth Anne White's *The Sheik Who Loved Me*, the Arabic language can provide the authentic link to the primality of the desert. In this novel, the sheikh's "R's rolled in his throat, his Arabic accent swallowing the refined British as his smooth veneer fell away to reveal the rough warrior underneath."⁸⁶ Perhaps one reason the recourse to a biologically based notion of race is important is precisely because the stereotype of the priapic, virile sheikh depends on the popular notion that raw sexuality is part of his nature.⁸⁷ In turn, the threat of a potentially violent and unbridled nature needs some sort of check or safety valve to assure the heroine (and her identified readers) that her romance will end happily ever after.

In desert romances, the deployment of biological notions of race (again modeled originally in Hull's *The Sheik*), sometimes involves the propensity for the sheikh-hero to have Spanish ancestry. Though it would appear that naming Spanish ancestry would corroborate biological claims to European ancestry (as it did for Hull),⁸⁸ its function is actually a bit more ambiguous. Though none of them directly name it,⁸⁹ Spanish ancestry implies a possible, or even probable, connection to Moorish ancestry, which simultaneously suggests Muslim ancestry, raising the question of how the category of race incorporates that of religion.⁹⁰

If desert romances harbor strong articulations of race, they do so partly through the ghostly presence of the Moor, a figure through which the amalgamation of race and religion becomes clearer. Though the concept of race is widely understood to be a modern one, drawing on biological and cultural characteristics in the social construction of race, several scholars have pointed to the context of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain as one in which religious difference functioned in racialized ways. On the mass displacement and forced conversion of Muslims and Jews during this time period, Anouar Majid argues that "*limpieza de sangre*" statutes racialized faith,⁹¹ demonstrating that religious difference (even if regarded in cultural terms) could operate as a foundation for racialization. Although the race concept followed a "path toward secularization" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,⁹² and, in its modern form, privileged biological and cultural difference as a way to mark race (through eugenics, scientific racism, and the idea of the civilizing mission), religious difference can still be understood as an integral factor in constructing race.

Neither should religious difference be seen merely as a protoracial formation. In his book *Semites*, Gil Anidjar explores how, in categorizing Arabs and Jews, "race and religion have functioned internally and externally . . . as markers of historical shifts" continuing throughout the modern era.⁹³ Insofar as modernity can be understood as ideologically linked to secularism and universality, religious difference has functioned to produce a set of clear, structuring others

to the dominant subjects of modernity. Whether it is through the coupling of religion with a surpassed, traditional past or through the idea that universalism transcends religion,⁹⁴ the dominant construction of modernity depends on religious others, who have often been conceived in racialized terms. As Junaid Rana argues, “Race and religion commingled in the formation of modernity.”⁹⁵ The racialization of the sheikh—just enough to render him an alpha male, but not so much as to make him uncomfortably “real”—therefore figures partly through his shadowy connection to Spanish Muslim ancestry.

Civilizing Religion

The main deployment of the trope of civilization in desert romances is as a culturalist counterpoint to the biological notions of race that function to prove the sheikh’s authentic desert ancestry, and therefore lend credibility to his alpha-male nature. This mechanism usually manifests in reference to his careful hygiene and erudite reading collection, probably because these are the markers that Hull originally used in *The Sheik*. There she coded Sheik Ahmed as civilized by inserting details about the “fastidious care he took of himself, the frequent bathing, [and] the spotless cleanliness of his robes, the fresh wholesomeness that clung about him” as well as about his collection of French books, which “suggested possibilities that would not have existed in a raw native, or one only superficially coated with a veneer of civilization.”⁹⁶ These details work to assure the reader that the “raw” and savage nature of the sheikh-hero can be tamed and held in check, and they have been so successful in communicating the point that many contemporary desert romances replicate them almost exactly.⁹⁷ This common use of the trope of civilization, then, serves as a fairly overt way to sanitize the sheikh’s absolute difference enough that he can remain an object of reader fantasy.

In a more subtle system of meanings, though, the sheikh is racialized (or sometimes sanitized) through a discursively formed tension around notions of civilization and barbarism, where “civilization” codes a particular ideology of secularism. In other words, in these instances religiosity is a means of racialization. Occasionally, this comes through quite clearly, as in Ryan’s *Burning Love*: “The Sheik didn’t fall to his knees and face Mecca as his Muslim followers did. But he experienced a great measure of inner peace whenever he was in his beloved desert at sundown.”⁹⁸ Such overt naming of religion is quite rare because, as I have explained, it borders too closely to what mainstream readers understand to be the uncomfortable realities of Islam. As Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini put it in their introduction to *Secularisms*, a “network of asso-

ciations is established between religious-secular opposition and that between bondage and freedom.”⁹⁹

Such an opposition can be clearly seen in the passage from *Burning Love*, in which the Sheik’s subjects are represented as if in “bondage” to their religion, while the Sheik himself draws on an “inner peace” gained from the desert setting, suggesting his more individual (and liberalized) relationship to religion. Indeed, the passage seems to suggest that he does not adhere to any organized religion at all, regardless of the behaviors of his “Muslim followers.” Such rare, but revealing, passages in desert romances demonstrate the complex constellations of meaning that form around the notions of religiosity and secularism, and the way these constellations of meaning connect to broader constructions of difference. Though religion remains purposely uncoded (in any overt way) in most desert romances, the sheikh character provides a useful way to understand the way religion operates as an implicit and unmarked signifier of race.¹⁰⁰ Islam is tied to race partly through dominant discourses about civilization, such as Samuel Huntington’s infamous “clash of civilizations” thesis. One salient example of the way that notions of race, civilization, and religion inform one another is in the 1944 naturalization case for an Arab immigrant, which held that the immigrant was white based on the fact that Arabs had “historically served as *transmitters* of western civilization.”¹⁰¹ Here the concept of western civilization depends on the image of the (biblical) “Holy Land” as the (Christian) origins of western civilization. In other words, though the idea of “western civilization” is often presented as a thoroughly secular one, it is best understood as an incarnation of what Jakobsen and Pelligrini have called “Protestant secularism,” signaling how secularism and religion are coimplicated.¹⁰²

More to the point, perhaps, is how the notion of civilization works in tandem with that of secularism to produce a set of religious others, quite independently of actual religiosity. Anidjar posits that “secularism is the name Christianity gave itself when it invented ‘religion’ [and] named its other or others as ‘religions.’”¹⁰³ The “invention of religion,” which is to say the invention of a particular understanding of religion as provincial, backward, or violent (among other things), and its opposition to a secular formation, clearly manifests in the common binary formulation of “Islam and the West” used prominently in the clash of civilizations thesis. The use of religious difference as a counterpoint to the secularized (i.e., civilized) West can be seen in Roberts’s *Sweet Revenge*, which invokes the image of the greedy and brutal “oil sheik” popularized in the United States in the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Spinning a tale quite similar to the 1980s hit film *Not without My Daughter*, *Sweet Revenge* chronicles the story of a white American actress who falls in love

with a sheikh and moves to his country, only to be abused and despised by him for giving birth to a girl child. She is sequestered in a harem while her husband, Abdu, takes other wives in hopes of securing a male heir. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁰⁴ the image of the harem as evidence of extreme Middle Eastern/Muslim patriarchy and oppression rose in U.S. popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s as the Middle East came to be perceived as a security threat. In this schema, the perception of the harem walls as foreboding and impenetrable becomes crucial to the narrative of brutally oppressive patriarchy steeped in religious fundamentalism. As Roberts puts it in *Sweet Revenge*: “The walls rose high, to prevent a woman who walked there from tempting any man. Such was the way of Islam.”¹⁰⁵ Against this oppression, the novel’s white heroine can only hope that Jaquir, her adopted country, will become socially liberalized as it becomes more fiscally liberalized.

Roberts presents Jaquir as a fully primitive and traditional society, with oil as its only real resource; she therefore presents contact with the “West” as possible only through the “lure” of oil. Moreover, she adheres to the predominant stereotype of the Arab/Muslim world in the 1970s and 1980s as a place filled with abundant oil and religious (Islamic) fanaticism, and simultaneously rooted in atavistic traditions and therefore deeply antagonistic toward “the West.” Again, as Roberts frames it: “Abdu wanted the money and technology the West would bring, even while he detested Westerners for providing them. With Westerners pouring into Jaquir, there would be progress. In time there might even be liberation.”¹⁰⁶ Here Roberts seems to meld dominant U.S. perceptions of the Middle East emerging from both the 1973 oil embargo and the 1979 Iranian revolution neatly into the character of Abdu, the heartless sheikh antihero of *Sweet Revenge*. He wants to acquire riches from oil, but he sees the “West” as an “abomination of Allah.”¹⁰⁷ In these formulations of the sheikh antihero and his desert kingdom, religion is certainly a crucial fact of Abdu’s otherness, but it is not the only factor. He is set in opposition to a constellation of “western” markers—a complex network of associations with secularism, modernity, and civilization—that ultimately mark him as a “racial figure based in notions of universality.”¹⁰⁸ Because he is the villain in *Sweet Revenge*, and not the heroine’s love interest (she falls in love with a fellow spy who helps her seek revenge), his relatively overt racialization within the narrative does not threaten the crucial romantic fantasy.

Berobed or Bedeviled

The most obvious or salient way in which sheikhs are covertly racialized through cultural markers are in what amounts to a fetishization of “Arabian” forms of cultural dress. The sheikh’s “robes” and “headdress” (as they are most often called) are both exotic markers and key signifiers of erotic sexuality. For example, in Sophie Weston’s *In the Arms of the Sheikh*, the image of Sheikh Kazim “in full desert robes” and “full desert regalia” provides an erotic teaser for the heroine, Natasha Lambert, until the novel’s very last line when she is able to “[take] off his robe at last.”¹⁰⁹ This metaphorical unveiling of the sheikh, often at the end of the novel, quite literally signals the taming of his primal/savage/desert nature. While the author must be careful not to rid him of his powerful virility altogether (because in doing so, she would strip him of his alpha maleness), she does clearly place the power of unveiling in the heroine’s hands. Only she has the ability to both excite and tame her desert prince.

Publishers, too, have been clearly attuned to the role of cultural dress in the interplay between reality and fantasy, as evinced by the shift in cover designs over the past decade. In addition to the “money factor”¹¹⁰ (i.e., the “oil-rich Arab sheikh”) or the idea that the sheikh has “got crazy money and his own private gas pump,”¹¹¹ romance readers point to cultural dress as one element of the sheikh that gives him exotic appeal. According to the *Sheikhs and Desert Love* Web site, one of the top five things that makes a sheikh-hero so “hot” is “when the sheikh makes a change from wearing Western style clothing to the traditional robes of his country.”¹¹²

As demonstrated on another site, in an entry titled “Sheiken and Stirred,” (at least) some fans associate the cultural dress with such actors as Omar Sharif and such historical figures as T. E. Lawrence (“Lawrence of Arabia”),¹¹³ thereby both referencing an orientalist tradition and suggesting a tame, European hero hidden under his exotic garments. As one commenter explains, “The typical romance sheik is a white man wearing a turban, and I agree . . . that this is probably one of the reasons why they sell so well. You have the fantasy of the rich exotic sheik, without dealing with the reality of how a real Middle Eastern man would behave with a female.”¹¹⁴ Several things come together in this quote; the reader’s misidentification of the “turban” (an Indian sikh form of cultural dress) with what might be worn by a sheikh indicates the conflation of multiple ethnic and religious markers in popular perceptions of the sheikh. Further, the comment indicates the tricky balance novelists try to strike between highlighting exoticized cultural markers and carefully eliding reference to any

cultural markers that come too close to uncomfortable realities for readers. The shifting valence of cultural markers becomes apparent, as I mentioned earlier, in publishers' decisions about what artwork to use on book covers.

Prior to 2001, desert romance novels often depicted the sheikh-hero "berobed" on the cover, perhaps as a way to link to the Sharif/Lawrence fantasy. Since 2001, however, presumably because the events of September 11 reignited popular U.S. association of the *kuffiyeh/ghutra* and *iqal* ("headdress") with Arab/Muslim terrorism, the book covers have ceased to include any cultural markers, depicting instead a generalized image of a Mediterranean (i.e., Greek, Italian, or Arab/Muslim) hero. Nevertheless, they remain an integral aspect of the romance story itself, making an appearance in many, if not all, mass-market romances. In this respect, "desert robes" demonstrate the subtle interplay between overt and covert representations of race, and how the same racial marker (here, robes) can simultaneously operate on various levels, depending on its placement and framing.

One main way in which the robes function is in classic orientalist fashion. Here fictionalized Arabia usually plays out as the imagined brutal, mysterious, and exotic desert setting, and is clearly informed by popular U.S. orientalist images. In *The Sheikh's Unsuitable Bride*, for example, the heroine Diane Metcalfe finds herself assigned as chauffeur for Sheikh Zahir bin Ali bin Khatib al-Khatib. When she realizes her assignment, she finds "her head full of snowy robes, the whole Lawrence of Arabia thing."¹¹⁵ Other novels reference memorable images from the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, even if they do not name it. In Ryan's *Burning Love*, for example, Ryan presents Sharif "riding at tremendous speed, his white robes billowing out behind him, [when he] abruptly gave the reins a powerful jerk that sent the big white horse straight up into the air, spinning high on his hind legs,"¹¹⁶ an image that replicates some of the film's iconic scenes.¹¹⁷

In *Traded to the Sheikh* (2005), the heroine, Emily Ross, makes sense of her surroundings through five separate references to *The Arabian Nights* and one reference to Omar Khayyam.¹¹⁸ As indicated by the title, Emily finds herself in a potentially dangerous form of captivity at first, so her first encounter with Sheikh Zageo introduces the question of racialization (but not eroticization): "His clothes—a long white undertunic and a sleeveless over-robe in royal purple edged in gold braid—seemed to embrace Arabian culture but he didn't look like an Arab, more aristocratic Spanish."¹¹⁹ While classic orientalist images, including *Lawrence of Arabia*, clearly play a role in the novels, the invocation of the sheikh's robes is also connected to race by exoticizing the sheikh. While I agree with the commenter who pointed to the *Lawrence of Arabia* fantasy

as one that safely sanitizes the sheikh, it ignores the racial dialectics at play in constructing the sheikh. The white robe sometimes serves as the perfect contrast to highlight the otherness of the Arab character, as in the following scene in *Blue Jasmine*: “His robes fell in sculptured folds around his lean figure and he wore a *shemagh* that was very white against the darkness of his face. He was purely Arabian.”¹²⁰ Perhaps because this character is not the sheikh-hero himself, a description of his phenotypic racial otherness can be stated more clearly.¹²¹ In any case, the robes highlight the character’s perceived authenticity as an exotic desert dweller or, as she puts it, a “pure Arabian.”

The question of what a pure Arabian is points to the curious conflation of religious, tribal, ethnic, and regional conceptions of “Arabia” that seem to meld in the sheikh’s character. The signifier of the sheikh’s robes is perhaps a perfect one in that it speaks to the conflated identity of the prototypical sheikh-hero. While the vague references to “Arabia” quite clearly reference popular orientalist representations, they also seem to reflect some amount of research on the authors’ part. In other words, fictionalized Arabia in desert romancelandia bears some resemblance both to contemporary Saudi Arabia and to a historical notion of the Arabian Peninsula. In these instances, rather than refer to a (modern) ethnic, nation-state notion of Arab (in which the Arabic language is a key aspect of what defines Arabian), the geographic region of the Arabian Peninsula takes on greater importance. Indeed, the sometimes overt and sometimes coded references to “tribal” or “Berber” dress and customs (i.e., “swathed in the blue veils of the Tuareg tribe”) seem to get closer to the image of a desert nomadic people, which is the imagined setting from which the sheikh usually hails.¹²² Because he is a “desert prince” or even a “desert king,” he typically appears in more regal clothing, which may likely be borrowed from the trends of the elite in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

Novelists sometimes include a passage to describe and explain the robe and headdress, and, on these occasions, they usually describe contemporary Gulf fashion.¹²³ When Diane Metcalfe finally succeeds in erotic union with her sheikh, she “[finds] herself staring at her fantasy: the desert prince she had expected when she’d dashed to the City Airport. The whole white robes, gold-trimmed cloak, headdress thingy.”¹²⁴ The “robes” are almost never directly linked to religion in the novels, though there is some evidence that they reference Islam for at least some readers. Roberts’s *Sweet Revenge* offers a salient example, since in her novel, the sheikh is the story’s antagonist. He is coded as specifically wearing “the white throbe [*sic*] and headdress of Islam.”¹²⁵ From just these cursory examples, it seems clear not only that the sheikh is racialized through the cultural (dress) marker of his “robes” but also that this marker

has no clear ethnic or religious referent for the popular audience. At best, it is tied to a large geographic region, which, in turn, calls up a ready-made set of orientalist images in readers' minds. The signifier of "desert robes" conflates ethnic/religious/geographic identities while blurring any direct reference to the Middle East or Islam. It therefore racializes the sheikh-hero in ways that enable desert romance writers to carefully balance the tension of the fantasy tinged with reality that readers demand while reflecting dominant racial logics of the conflated Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/terrorist in the post 9/11 context. As readers from previous sections suggest, the robes always on some level signal a link to Lawrence of Arabia and therefore suggest the whiteness of the hero underneath it all. Usually focusing on the "robes" and relatively minimizing the "headdress thingy," writers simultaneously reflect and deflect racial anxieties about the Arab/Muslim male, drawing on them to eroticize the hero and casting them aside to maintain the aura of fantasy.

For example, since the sheikh is fundamentally an alpha-male hero, his power must be readily apparent, and his cultural dress sometimes operates as an indicator, as in *The Desert Bride of Al Zayed*: "Clad in the *thobe*, the fearsomely muscled body hidden beneath the white folds, he looked foreign, dangerous, and very, very powerful."¹²⁶ Contrary to the Lawrence of Arabia image, here the sheikh's foreignness makes him an object of attraction. His dangerous and powerful appearance is a key aspect of what draws the white heroine to him. The process by which he is racialized through cultural dress, though, simultaneously exoticizes him. Because of the dialectics between fantasy and reality in romance novels, the sociopolitical realities that his desert robes could potentially (in)cite for readers must always be readily submergible to the erotic fantasy around which the narrative arc revolves. For Sheik Ahmed and his heroine Christa in Connie Mason's *Desert Ecstasy*, the sublimation of race to eroticism comes in one deft move: "With a cry of impatience, his headdress and veil were thrown aside and he captured her lips, kissing her deeply, his tongue pillaging her mouth as his hand continued to work its magic below."¹²⁷

Indeed, the sheikh-heroes in desert romances work various kinds of magic for their (usually white) heroines, but perhaps the most interesting kind of magic is the one they employ for their dedicated readership: an uncanny ability to walk the tightrope between fantasy and reality. If comments from popular romance novel blogs indicate all the reasons romance readers find the sheikh to be undesirable, reasons that imply an intensified racialization of Arabs and Muslims in the contemporary war on terror, the novels themselves speak to the way romance writers have negotiated the shifting racial realities of Arabs and Muslims to keep the desert romance fantasy alive for at least some read-

ers. The grammar of race in desert romances operates on a submerged level, precisely because of the more salient racialization of Arabs and Muslims since 2001. Nevertheless, a careful consideration of how authors employ ethnic, religious, and geographic markers (through mention of the sheikh's ancestry, references to Islam, and eroticized descriptions of his cultural dress) reveals an underlying structure of racialization. It is an adaptable form of racialization, one that shape-shifts into the categories of ethnicity, culture, and religion to appear more tame, hoping to disguise the role of these categories in the racial formation of Arabs and Muslims.

Desert romances are perhaps the ideal texts for reading the lexicon of race vis-à-vis Arabs/Middle Easterners/Muslims in the United States; because they must simultaneously subdue and draw on the notion of race while constructing desire for the sheikh-hero, they can offer moments of X-ray clarity about the way markers of ethnicity, religion, and culture can be irradiated with racial logic. In them, the paradox of race as both a social fact and a cultural fantasy throbs in the hot, flickering light of desire: "She could see him now, too, in the ceremonial tribal outfit, his dark hair glowing in the light of the lamp, his dark eyes glowing with untamed desire. He was more than the sheiks of her fantasies—more fierce, more proud, more passionate. And tantalizingly real."¹²⁸

Notes

I am deeply appreciative for the insightful comments of both the anonymous reviewers and the editorial board at *American Quarterly*, which helped me re-think the essay in critical ways. I am also grateful for the careful work of my research assistants Tahereh Aghdasifar and Nik Ramey.

1. Desert romances make up approximately sixteen of the eight thousand new romance titles published yearly, rendering them a very small percentage of the total. Nevertheless, it is a well-known and long-standing subgenre, perhaps partly because of the fact that some herald *The Sheik* (1919) as the progenitor to all mass-market romance novels.
2. I use the awkward term *western* here because it is the term most often used in the novels themselves. It refers to a white woman from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia, probably because these are the major sites of authorship and publication of desert romances, and mass-market romance novels more generally. See Amira Jarmakani, "Romance Literature: US, Canada, UK, Australia," *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, general ed. Suad Joseph (Brill, Netherlands, 2010), Brill Online, BRILL demo user, April 2010, http://www.pauyonline.brill.nl/subscriber/uid=2026/title_home?title_id=ewic_ewic.
3. See the sheikh category on the I [Heart] Harlequin Presents Web site, www.iheartpresents.com/category/sheikh/; the Romancing the Desert—Sheikh Books blog, <http://romancing-the-desert---sheikh-books.blogspot.com/>; and the Sheikhs and Desert Love marketplace (which began as a private Web site), <http://www.sheikhs-and-desert-love.com/index.htm>.
4. Nan Ryan, *Burning Love* (New York: Harper, 1996), 213.
5. *Ibid.*
6. A good example can be found on the cover of Bonnie Vanak's *The Sword and the Sheath* (New York: Dorchester Publishing, 2007).

7. Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).
8. Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 190; SBSarah, "Trend Spotting," Smart Bitches Trashy Books: All of the Romance, None of the Bullshit blog, June 21, 2011, <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/trend-spotting/>.
9. Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, 77.
10. Stephanie Wardrop, "Last of the Red Hot Mohicans: Miscegenation in the Popular American Romance," *MELUS* 22.2 (1997): 61–74.
11. On the link between the Latin lover and the sheikh, see Gaylyn Studlar, "Discourses of Gender and Ethnicity: The Construction and De(con)struction of Rudolph Valentino as Other," *Film Criticism* 13.2 (1989): 18–35.
12. Stephanie Burley, "Shadows and Silhouettes: The Racial Politics of Category Romance," *Paradoxa* 5.13–14 (2000): 324.
13. Evelyn Alsultany, "Representing the War on Terror in TV Dramas," *International Connections*, Publication of the Center for International and Comparative Studies at the University of Michigan, Fall 2009, 4–6; Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. Media Post-9/11* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming); Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).
14. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007); Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 7.
15. See, for example, Loreth Anne White, *The Sheik Who Loved Me* (New York: Silhouette, 2005), and Linda Conrad, *Secret Agent Sheik* (New York: Harlequin, 2011).
16. A *kuffiyeh* is a garment of triangularly folded cloth, often with a checkered pattern, worn (usually) by Arab or Kurdish men to protect the head from heat and cold. It became known in the United States mostly through the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, though it has recently been popularized as both a (Palestinian) resistance and solidarity symbol and a "global chic" fashion symbol. See Ted Swedenburg, "Bad Rap for a Neck Scarf?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 41 (2009): 184–85. The term for the similar item of clothing (usually white), worn mostly in the Gulf region of the Middle East is *ghutrah*, and the term for the rope cord that holds the *kuffiyeh* or *ghutrah* in place on the head is *igal*.
17. For more on Lawrence of Arabia as an object of desire, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Steve Caton's discussion of the racial politics of the original movie poster for *Lawrence of Arabia* (the 1962 film). Because the shadowed figure of T. E. Lawrence could be read as black, the poster was quickly rescinded and revised. Steven Caton, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Film's Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
18. For an analysis of the racial politics of sheikh romance covers with a focus on the shifts in skin color, see Amy Burge, "Disappearing Difference," Teach Me Tonight: Musings on Romance Fiction from an Academic Perspective blog, August 24, 2011, <http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com/>.
19. There are nine out of a total of sixty-five desert romances published in 2002 or later that feature a sheikh wearing a headdress on the cover (less than 15 percent), while there are thirty-seven out of a total of eighty-two desert romances (nearly 50 percent) published in 2001 or earlier that feature a sheikh wearing a headdress on the cover.
20. Brenda Jackson, *Delaney's Desert Sheikh* (New York: Silhouette, 2002), 158, 10.
21. *Ibid.*, 139.
22. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 37; Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
23. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 64.
24. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 29.
25. *Ibid.*, 31.
26. *Ibid.*, 1.

27. Nadine Naber, "Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!': Cultural Racism, Nation-Based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11," in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 179–81.
28. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*, 21.
29. Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 85, 123–24, 139.
30. *Ibid.*, x.
31. On the racialization of *muhajabaat*, or women who wear hijab, see Louise Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage, 2009).
32. Winant, *New Politics of Race*, 3.
33. Burke Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models, and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).
34. McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 45–83.
35. Steven Salaita, *The Holy Land in Transit: Colonialism and the Quest for Canaan* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006); Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
36. Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
37. A similar shift can be charted with reference to Chinese Americans, whose racial construction as distant and exotic shifted into one understood as "present and threatening," though they clearly bear a different relationship to the discourse of national security. See Robert G. Lee, *Oriental: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 28.
38. For more on the history of the sheikh character in U.S. popular culture, see Amira Jarmakani, "The Sheik Who Loved Me': Romancing the War on Terror," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35.4 (2010): 993–1017.
39. For examples of the latter, see McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 137.
40. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line*, 154–56.
41. Mitchy, August 17, 2007 (6:23 p.m.), comment on Amy Wilkins, "The Unshakeable Appeal of the Sheikh Hero," I [Heart] Presents, <http://www.iheartpresents.com/?p=96> (accessed October 9, 2008); Marilyn S, August 20, 2007 (3:18 p.m.), comment on Wilkins, "Unshakeable Appeal of the Sheikh Hero."
42. Trish Morey, March 30, 2007 (8:21 a.m.), comment on Kimberly Young, "Kimberly Young is a Love-Slave to the Sheikh!" I [Heart] Presents, <http://www.iheartpresents.com/?p=40> (accessed October 9, 2008).
43. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).
44. Robin, August 19, 2007 (11:19 p.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Alphas in Marriage," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/alphas_in_marriage/ (accessed September 11, 2009).
45. Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 18.
46. *Ibid.*, 14.
47. E. M. Hull, *The Sheik* (New York: Wildside, 2004), 133.
48. Dalia, June 12, 2007 (5:51 p.m.), comment on Gwyneth Bolton, "Bitch Magazine Does Romance," Gwyneth Bolton's Blog, <http://gwynethbolton.blogspot.com/2007/06/bitch-magazine-does-romance.html> (accessed October 9, 2008); Cyranetta, May 22, 2007 (11:01 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance," Smart Bitches Trashy Books, http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/meg_cabot_comfort_reads_and_sheikh_romance/ (accessed October 9, 2008).
49. Charlene, May 22, 2007 (4:06 p.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance."
50. Beth, May 22, 2007 (6:16 p.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance."
51. Ostensibly, she is referring to a set of commercials for Calgon bubble bath, which used the popular slogan "Calgon, take me away."
52. patricia sargeant, June 12, 2007 (4:12 p.m.), comment on Bolton, "Bitch Magazine Does Romance."

53. Ann Wesley Hardin, May 22, 2007 (8:41 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance."
54. Desert romances and paranormal romances are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories, as demonstrated by Nina Bruhns's "Vampire Sheikh" series, but a discussion of them is outside the scope of this article.
55. Devon, June 12, 2007 (10:21 a.m.), comment on Bolton, "Bitch Magazine Does Romance."
56. Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8.3 (1982): 521–34.
57. CT, August 18, 2007 (11:40 a.m.), comment on Wilkins, "Unshakeable Appeal of the Sheikh Hero."
58. Stephanie, May 22, 2007 (7:26 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance."
59. SB Sarah, September 10, 2009 (8:20 a.m.), "The Playboy Sheikh's Virgin Stable Girl by Sharon Kendrick," Smart Bitches, Trashy Books, <http://www.smartbitchestrashybooks.com/index.php/weblog/comments/the-playbot-sheikhs-virgin-stable-girl-by-Sharon-Kendrick/>.
60. Angel, August 16, 2007 (9:44 p.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Alphas in Marriage."
61. *Ibid.* (11:41 p.m.).
62. I specify these three because they are the major sites of romance novel production and tend to be the homes of most (white) heroines.
63. Najida, August 19, 2007 (6:51 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Alphas in Marriage."
64. For more on this, see Jarmakani, "'Sheik Who Loved Me.'"
65. Erin, May 22, 2007 (8:43 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance."
66. snarkhunter, August 17, 2007 (9:55 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Alphas in Marriage."
67. *Ibid.* (2:45 p.m.).
68. Jackson, *Delaney's Desert Sheikh*, 84, 150, 160.
69. Jane Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), xiii.
70. Another interesting moment in the campaign was the spectacular, decontextualized coverage of Jeremiah Wright's comment about September 11 as an example of "America's chickens coming home to roost." Despite his standing as a prominent member of the black church, the coverage seemed to cast him as a Farrakhan-like figure, a conflation that was especially interesting given Malcolm X's famous comment about JFK's assassination "representing a case of chickens coming home to roost" (Smith, *Islam in America*, 88).
71. For further ruminations on comparing Arabs and Muslims to African Americans, and "Arabs as the new Blacks," see Moustafa Bayoumi, "The Race Is On: Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination," *Middle East Report Online*, March 2010, http://www.merip.org/merof/interventions/bayoumi_interv.html (accessed May 28, 2010).
72. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 17.
73. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
74. Chow, *Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 23–30.
75. *Ibid.*, 25.
76. Hull, *Sheik*, 133.
77. *Ibid.*
78. Susan Blake, "What 'Race' Is the Sheik: Rereading a Desert Romance," in *Doubled Plots: Romance and History*, ed. Susan Strenle and Mary Paniccia Carden (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 76–78.
79. Etienne Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism?'" in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 21.
80. Chow, *Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 13–14.
81. Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism?'" 26.
82. I use the somewhat awkward formulation "desert ancestry" here because most romances take place in fabricated countries, constructing a fictionalized Arabia characterized by its location in a desert climate.
83. Emma Darcy, *Traded to the Sheikh* (New York: Harlequin, 2005), 111.
84. Trish Morey, *Stolen by the Sheikh* (New York: Harlequin, 2006), 9.
85. *Ibid.*, 19.

86. Loreth Anne White, *The Sheik Who Loved Me* (New York: Silhouette, 2006), 155.
87. Indeed, this is what the term *sheik* came to mean after the 1921 Rudolph Valentino film. See Patricia Raub, "Issues of Passion and Power in E. M. Hull's *The Sheik*," *Women Studies* 21 (1992): 119–28; and also Billie Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).
88. Darcy, *Traded to the Sheikh*, 18; Ryan, *Burning Love*, 325; and Violet Winspear, *Blue Jasmine*, 50.
89. An exception is Ryan's *Burning Love*, which curiously names Moorish ancestry in connection with the sheikh's Irish mother (325). For mention of "the Moorish fantasy," see also Annie West, *For the Sheikh's Pleasure* (New York: Harlequin, 2007), 10.
90. "Who would dare deny that religious distinctions . . . hide the most persistent remnants of the history of racism?" Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), 20.
91. Anouar Majid, *We Are All Moors: Ending Centuries of Crusades against Muslims and Other Enemies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 53.
92. Junaid Rana, "The Story of Islamophobia," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 9.2 (2007): 152.
93. Anidjar, *Semites*, 18.
94. For an exploration of these as main elements of the dominant narrative of secularization, a process deeply embedded in the project of modernity, see Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).
95. Rana, "Story of Islamophobia," 150.
96. Hull, *Sheik*, 223, 68.
97. See, for example, Ryan, *Burning Love*, 84; Penny Jordan, *Possessed by the Sheikh* (New York: Harlequin, 2005), 7; Violet Winspear, *Blue Jasmine* (New York: Harlequin, 1970), 32.
98. Ryan, *Burning Love*, 65.
99. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms*, 6.
100. See also Moustafa Bayoumi, "Racing Religion," *New Centennial Review* 6.2 (Fall 2006): 267–93.
101. Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Arab Americans and the Meaning of Race," in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, ed. Amarjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 324. See also Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, 56–57, for an immigration case that made the argument for Syrian compatibility with whiteness and western civilization based on its inclusion in the "Christian fold."
102. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms*, 3.
103. Anidjar, *Semites*, 48. For more on the social construction of religion and secularism, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21–66.
104. Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
105. Nora Roberts, *Sweet Revenge* (New York: Bantam, 1989), 30.
106. *Ibid.*, 40.
107. *Ibid.*, 41.
108. Rana, "Story of Islamophobia," 150.
109. Sophie Weston, *In the Arms of the Sheikh* (New York: Harlequin, 2006), 92, 127, 188.
110. Ann Aguirre, June 12, 2007 (1:02 p.m.), comment on Bolton, "Bitch Magazine Does Romance."
111. Kaite, May 22, 2007 (7:23 a.m.), comment on SB Sarah, "Meg Cabot, Comfort Reads, and Sheikh Romance."
112. *Sheikhs and Desert Romance* blog, "What Makes a Sheikh Romance Hot?" <http://sheikhs-and-desert-love.com/presentation02.html> (accessed June 3, 2008).
113. "Thursday Talk-Time with Kate Walker: Sheiken and Stirred," October 6, 2006, The Pink Heart Society blog, <http://pinkheartsociety.blogspot.com/2006/10/thursday-talk-time-with-kate-walker.html> (accessed May 30, 2008).
114. Karen Scott, June 12, 2007 (7:50 a.m.), comment on Bolton, "Bitch Magazine Does Romance."
115. Liz Fielding, *The Sheikh's Unsuitable Bride* (New York: Harlequin, 2008), 12.
116. Ryan, *Burning Love*, 156.
117. See also Sara Wood, *Desert Hostage* (New York: Harlequin, 1991), 51.

118. Darcy, *Traded to the Sheikh* (Arabian Nights references are on 35, 53, 66, 97, 110; Omar Khayyam on 53).
119. *Ibid.*, 18.
120. Winspear, *Blue Jasmine*, 113.
121. There are desert romances that use this technique for the sheikh-hero, though, as in Wood's *Desert Hostage* (152).
122. Connie Mason, *Desert Ecstasy* (New York: Dorchester, 1988), 136.
123. Jane Porter, *The Sheikh's Chosen Queen* (New York: Harlequin, 2008), 10; Tessa Radley, *The Desert Bride of Al Zayed* (New York: Silhouette, 2007), 51, 64, 66.
124. Fielding, *Sheikh's Unsuitable Bride*, 171.
125. Roberts, *Sweet Revenge*, 345.
126. Radley, *Desert Bride of Al Zayed*, 34.
127. Mason, *Desert Ecstasy*, 158.
128. Dana Marton, *Sheik Seduction* (New York: Harlequin, 2008).