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### 3. Desiring the Big Bad Blade: The Racialization of the Sheikh

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## Desiring the Big Bad Blade

### *The Racialization of the Sheikh*

Cultural fantasy does not evade but confronts history.

—Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 14

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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!”<sup>2</sup> 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 only be tamed by the heroine. Reminiscent of the individual-to-be-corrected from chapter 1, the construction of a good sheikh also orients us to another key technology of contemporary imperialism: liberal multiculturalism. Incorporating some of the language and ideas of antiracist civil rights movements, if not their structural and radical critiques, liberal multiculturalism tends to focus on the framework of individual rights as a means of addressing racial injustice. Leaning toward assimilationist frameworks, it conceives of redress in terms of encouraging diversity and tolerance. Given this background, the existence of representative marginalized or disenfranchised groups in positions of social power are often, not

surprisingly, marshaled as de facto evidence that racial justice has been achieved.

As an integral aspect of the narrative of exceptionalism in the United States, liberal multiculturalism also operates as a key technology of contemporary imperialism. Working in tandem with the logic of the gift of freedom, the exceptional claim of racial equity—usually described, simply, in temporal terms as post-racial—situates the U.S. as the teleological example for those subjects it benevolently dominates. Again, imperialism works through the justificatory logic of humanitarianism. As Jodi Melamed puts it: “A language of multiculturalism consistently portrays acts of force required for neoliberal restructuring to be humanitarian: a benevolent multicultural invader (the United States, multinational troops, a multinational corporation) intervenes to save life, ‘give’ basic goods or jobs, and promote political freedoms.”<sup>3</sup>

Desert romances are adept at advancing post-racial logics of neoliberal multiculturalism precisely because they do so through the individualistic and progress-oriented narrative of the love story. If multiculturalism’s key accomplice is the myth of American meritocracy (or, commonly, the American Dream and the idea that all have equal opportunity if they work hard enough), romances tap into the myth of universalism (i.e., differences don’t matter) through the “love conquers all” trope. In the case of the sheikh, authors must work to situate him as both liberal and neoliberal subject to weave him into the multicultural framework. In other words, he must value both individual rights and free-market ideals. The former can be manifested in several ways, from the sheikhs who assure their heroines that they value women’s rights to the sheikhs who speak about wanting to protect the pluralism of their country; importantly, the sheikh seeks to foster these ideals through liberal forms of the rule of law.

Although many desert romances (including Hull’s *The Sheik*) restore the sheikh as a viable hero by civilizing him into the narrative domain of universality, his portrayal within a neoliberal framework is a relatively new technique for the contemporary novels. In these novels, the sheikh wants to bring his kingdom into the new “global economy” precisely as a means of making his domain more progressive and liberated.<sup>4</sup> The fact that he unites (usually) with a U.S.-Anglo woman contributes to the typical multicultural logic—not only does their love conquer any

obstacle that cultural differences might present, but their cross-cultural union is immensely beneficial to his country. Contemporary desert romances therefore advance what could be called neoliberal multiculturalism; their happily-ever-after endings depend on appropriating the idea of cultural and racial difference for an ultimately profitable end.<sup>5</sup>

Sheikhs are not born as good multicultural subjects, though. Their eligibility for color-blind status must be crafted, particularly during a cultural context in which Arabiastani men are endowed with a racial excess that threatens the sanitary borders of multiculturalism. This chapter charts the way that sheikh-heroes are created as both pre- and post-racial subjects amid such a charged racialized landscape, paying special attention to the way that the romance writers manage to both mine and moderate his exoticism. If authors must work hard to make sure their sheikh-hero is not overtly raced, they must work equally hard to preserve an erotic remainder from his exotic difference.

In *Burning Love*, the erotic tension that both draws the heroine to Sharif's masculine magnetism and repels her from his barbarism must persist, even while any cognitive dissonance about why she would couple with a "lawless barbarian" who hates women is resolved. In other words, she must willingly become his love slave, while making it clear that she is not enslaved. Similar to the logic of liberal multiculturalism, the resolution to this seeming paradox comes in the heroine's proclaiming to value difference while demanding assimilation. Using the same strategy as Hull's *The Sheik*, Nan Ryan resolves the question of Sharif's barbarism by giving him European (i.e., civilized) ancestry. While his Arabiastani roots are safely resolved by the novel's end, then, his cultural identity as an Arabiastani sheikh nevertheless serves as 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 the construction of 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 or racially different as well as aggressive and powerful.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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, the lack of multiracial romances.<sup>8</sup> However, because the most common type of hero is an alpha male—that is, a strong, hard, dominant, aggressive, and confident man with a tender spot that the heroine uncovers—authors sometimes use exotic tropes to give the hero his hard edges.<sup>9</sup> 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 they draw on typical “noble savage” associations to craft his sensitive side for the heroine.<sup>10</sup>

Desert romances fall roughly into this group of exoticized romance heroes, a group that notably excludes the black hero.<sup>11</sup> 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 itself tellingly when it comes to race; nonwhite characters are either segregated or contained through various devices, while race appears in phantasmagoric ways. More often than not, authors use the “chromatic associations” of darkness and blackness in describing racially white heroes, thereby incorporating metaphors that are deeply embedded in racial logics of the global North.<sup>12</sup> In romance novels, then, the logic of racialization is often subsumed to that of eroticization since race cannot usually be overtly coded, which is, ironically, what makes the novels 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 of ethnic (Arab), religious (Muslim), and geographical (Middle Eastern) markers that construct Arabs/Muslims/Middle Easterners as a group in the United States. Since desert romances are overwhelmingly set in fictionalized Arabiastan, the authors tend to confuse and combine references to the Gulf region, North Africa, bedouins, Berbers, Arabic (the language), Iran, and Turkey. Though such confluences have somewhat characterized mainstream U.S. understandings of the Middle East since at least the nineteenth century, the configuration of the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern in the particular contexts of the war on terrorism (under Presidents Reagan, Bush Sr., and Clinton) and the war on terror (under Presidents Bush Jr. and Obama) has critically shifted. The configuration highlights religion (Islam) while simultaneously invoking a racial paradigm of cultural and civilizational difference. Put simply, the logic of racialization applies in newly visible ways to Arabs, Muslims, and anyone else perceived as such in the United States.

Following this shift, the field of 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" and Nadine Naber's "Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility" to Helen Samhan's "Not Quite White," Lisa Suhair Majaj's "Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race," Louise Cainkar'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 and Muslim Americans fit into the landscape of U.S. racial formations. These scholars have noted, in particular, the increasing racialization of Arab 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 and Muslim Americans and race, an equally compelling and relatively unexplored area of inquiry is the role of representation in the racial formations of Arab and Muslim Americans. Scholars such as Evelyn Alsultany and Ed-

ward Said have analyzed the shifting racialization of Arabs and Muslims in popular television drama and news media representations.<sup>13</sup> 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 race 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,” I offer the metaphor of radiation as a way of thinking about race vis-à-vis Arabs and Muslims in the United States.<sup>14</sup> As several desert romance plots reveal, 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.<sup>15</sup> This way of constructing a clear enemy aids in the racialization of that enemy; features that may or may not logically make a group cohere (e.g., geographical location in the case of Iran and Iraq) nevertheless serve to construct that group within the same racial formation for a U.S. audience. On a metaphorical level, radiation suggests how racial logic 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 radiation can operate silently and invisibly, it nevertheless has material effects. The failure of various nuclear reactors (most recently in Japan), not to mention radioactive remnants of warfare such as depleted uranium, has demonstrated that radiation permeates much larger areas than often admitted or acknowledged. Moreover, though its presence may be very real, the effects of radiation 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 the ways they are irradiated by the grammar of race. To use the metaphor differently, then, I give an x-ray reading of desert romances, outlining the skeleton of racial logic on which the flesh of the story hangs.

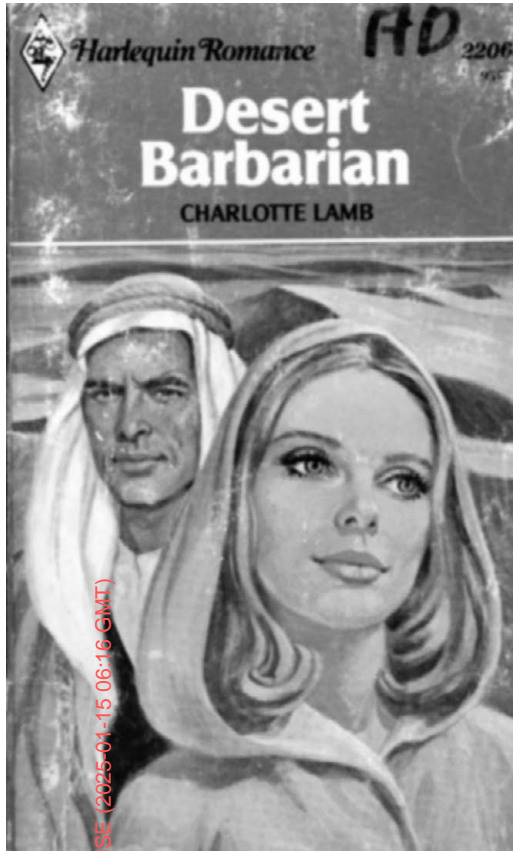


Figure 3.1 Charlotte Lamb, *Desert Barbarian*.  
New York: Harlequin, 1978.

Despite the old adage, the book covers of popular desert romances reveal some interesting things about how 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 the way that Arab and Muslim men have been racialized in the United States. Whereas early desert romances utilize the exotic marker of the *kufiya* or *ghutra* and *igal*—colloquially known as a headdress—to adorn the sheikh on the cover, recent romances, particularly since the events of September 11, 2001, are careful to represent the cover sheikh as abstractly Mediterranean with no clear markers of his connection to Arabiastan.<sup>16</sup> The transition to the





Figure 3.2. Linda Conrad, *Secret Agent Sheik*.  
New York: Harlequin, 2011.

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, an object of fantasy for fans of the desert romance.<sup>17</sup>

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 on online forums coupled with a textual analysis of some of the novels demonstrates that an inversion in overt 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.<sup>18</sup> In short, its representation would preclude the sheikh-hero from embodying the necessary pre- or post-racial identity demanded by liberal multiculturalism.

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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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, is virtually nonexistent in most desert romances, particularly in novels from the last decade.<sup>21</sup> This difference 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 U.S., what

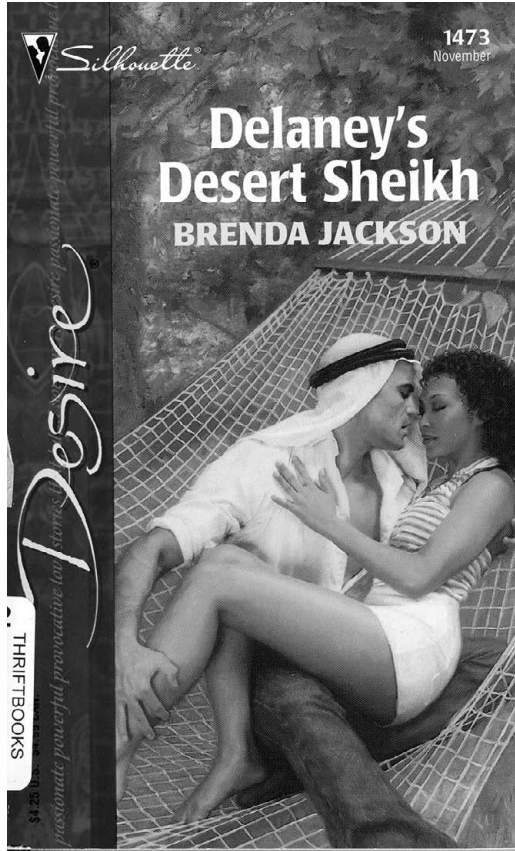


Figure 3.3. Brenda Jackson, *Delaney's Desert Sheikh*. New York: Silhouette, 2002.

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 logic 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 and Muslim Americans, as if there has been a clear, distinct switch from the paradigm of ethnicity to that of race in the last decade. On the contrary, 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.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, I do chart the increased salience of the concept of race to the construction of Arab 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 hallmark book, *Racial Formations in the United States*: (1) that race presents itself as an immutable and natural characteristic, despite being a sociohistorical concept, and (2) that racialization is a historically specific ideological process that sometimes “extends racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.”<sup>23</sup> The first point serves as a reminder of the persistent recourse to the natural, essential, or, especially in scientific iterations, the biological in discourses of race.<sup>24</sup> The second point highlights how organizing elements such as ethnicity, religion, or geopolitics can become racialized and how various political investments generally aid such a process.

There is no easy or shorthand way to refer to the racialization of Arab and Muslim Americans—an observation that further elucidates 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 commonsense notions of race fall back on vague assignments of type and descent and tend to (or try to) naturalize a cultural grouping.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, it seems to follow Paul Gilroy’s suggestion that race contemporarily functions according to “culture lines rather than color lines.”<sup>26</sup> At the same time, one can hardly speak of Arabs, Muslims, South Asians, Iranians, and anyone else appearing to be any of the above as one *cultural* group. Thus, 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/Muslim/Middle Eastern, as enemies of the state.<sup>27</sup> Here, ethnicity and race are clearly not mutually exclusive, as race serves as a means of containing or managing ethnic and religious identities. Race is a famously unstable concept, which often uses a variety of categorizations. Siobhan Somerville has noted, for instance, that “in nineteenth-century scientific usage, [race] might refer to groupings based variously on geography, religion, class, or color.”<sup>28</sup> In the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern configuration, such groupings are precisely at play—the configuration seems to

refer at once to ethnicity, religion, and geopolitical territory—implying that the conflation of these groupings is itself a characteristic of the concept and functioning of race. I refer here to race’s fluidity and flexibility, both in terms of space and time. Though I focus on modern notions of race, contemporary constructions of Arabs/Muslims/Middle Easterners seem to incorporate atavistic, proto-racial formations of the Muslim other, rendered through narratives of the Crusades, and especially the Inquisition and the Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>29</sup>

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.”<sup>30</sup> 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 the racialization of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., one must also take “bodies” to include notions of bodies that understand their embodiment to be shaped by racially marked, habitually worn clothing (like a hijab or turban) as well as habitually performed movements (like *salaat*, the Muslim practice of praying five times a day).<sup>31</sup>

The example of the Sikh turban brings together a number of the elements of racialization I have sought to delineate. Being neither Arab, 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) partly on the basis of a racially marked, habitually worn item of clothing. With some Sikh clothing probably assigned to the vague term *headdress* by popular U.S. imagination, the racialization of (and violence against) Sikh men in the U.S. after 9/11 also points to the particular architecture of this racial logic—it is designed and built upon U.S. military conflict, the war on terror, and the construction of the enemy of the state par excellence—the terrorist. The term *terrorist* here serves as a means of systematizing a whole set of state policies—classification, surveillance, strategies of punishment and detention, and distribution of resources—that are meted out along racial lines.<sup>32</sup> In this case, it also codifies the Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern configuration through the specter of the terrorist as a racial formation.

Rather than being entirely new, this racial formation constructs people with ancestry in the South and West Asia and North Africa regions in newly legible ways. As Melani McAlister points out in *Epic Encounters*, the Middle East has variously figured in U.S. national mythologies. These mythologies, in turn, configure race differently from one another. In identifications with the “Holy Land” as an origin of “Western civilization”—a premise popular in the late nineteenth century and into the turn of the century and then again in the post–World War II period (though never fully receding), the peoples of the Middle East tend to be relegated as atavistic elements of the landscape.<sup>33</sup> 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 and spectacular exhibits of others), people from the Middle East have often been assigned a quaint, atavistic, or timeless status.<sup>34</sup>

Even in representations that provoke—for example the belly dancing exhibition at the 1893 Fair 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 upon, 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 and Muslim Americans, as a threatening presence.<sup>35</sup> 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. This configuration turns Arabs and Muslims into a threatening presence, 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, 2001, 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 of the sheikh—broadly conceived—fits into this landscape in multiple ways. As I have argued in earlier chapters, he inhabits

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, both incarnations of the national security discourse.<sup>36</sup> 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, while, as noted earlier, his sexuality depends on a clear link between eroticism and an ethnicity containing a liminal racial logic.<sup>37</sup> 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 and erotic realm and through simultaneous submersion of markers of race.

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 racialization as a new phenomenon. In the second realm, I analyze how desert romances themselves submerge race and therefore subordinate it to ethnicity to successfully interpellate readers into the world of fantasy.

### The Sheikh: Fantasy or Reality?

Romance novels are widely considered 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 steady increase in desert romance publications 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.”<sup>38</sup> 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.”<sup>39</sup> Here, Morey’s point related to “escapism and sheer fantasy” 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 about more than mere escapism, when the novels tread too closely to the real world, readers and writers carefully guard the escapist element of the fiction. 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 emphasized and as readers will confirm, romance novels actually demonstrate a complex interplay between notions of fantasy and reality.<sup>40</sup> Radway argues that romance readers expect to learn some real historical and geographical facts, even if the romance story itself is fictional.<sup>41</sup>

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 on-line discussion, to which I will return later, 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.”<sup>42</sup> While this reader is interested in acknowledging the contingencies of reality within romance fiction, her co-respondents seem to reify a vague, common-sense line between fantasy and reality. Most readers in this thread insist that reality in the story doesn’t 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.<sup>43</sup> Particularly since desert romances both enjoy a long history and maintain their popularity despite the demonization of Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern masculinity during the war on terror, they offer a set of materials through which to analyze shifts in the racialization of Arabs and Muslims. As Heng notes: “Race itself, after all, is a fantasy with fully material effects and consequences.”<sup>44</sup> 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 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.<sup>45</sup> While the novels themselves frequently make reference to *Arabian Nights*, readers commenting in sheikh blog forums mention “berobed desert sheiks” as well as “hot desert winds, cool fountains, slight and slithery silk garments, unusually juicy fruit, attar of roses” as the exotic draw of the sheikh.<sup>46</sup> In other words, one commenter reminded other readers, the 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.”<sup>47</sup>

Addressing the question of how these novels could remain popular even in the face of contemporary political events, the commenter sug-

gests that it mimics the original desert fantasy, which invoked a thrilling and exotic “mystical place” far removed from readers’ notions 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 Arabiastan an ideal setting. As a commenter on the *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* blog 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 oooh it’s all so exotic.”<sup>48</sup>

Desert romances can operate as the über-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.”<sup>49</sup> 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?”<sup>50</sup>

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 period in which desert romances were more viable because the illusion of absolute distance between the U.S. 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 sheikh caricatures of greedy, lascivious Arab men, and the 1979 Iranian revolution and 1980s Libyan plane hijackings helped inaugurate the figure of the ter-

rorist, still prominent today. Both of these figures, in their engagement with U.S. notions of national security, helped to develop the notion of the Middle East as a threatening presence. However, according to these commenters' posts, the figures 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 comment on the *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* blog, posted by someone with the screen name Ann Wesley Hardin, notes the contemporary popularity of paranormal romances and muses that cultural, social, physical, and psychic or 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."<sup>51</sup> While she seems to mean this literally—and without irony—the idea that sheikhs and werewolves are comparable kinds of characters that simply have salience in different political contexts is a revealing one.<sup>52</sup> It demonstrates both the perceived unreality of the sheikh and his simultaneous association with monstrosity, a status that is 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 their 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."<sup>53</sup>

For these readers, it is impossible to engage in a romantic fantasy about the sheikh, because the supposed unpleasant realities of the Middle East 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."<sup>54</sup> They assume an authority of knowledge about the Middle East, particularly in relation to women's status and women's rights. In "The Unshakeable Appeal of the Sheikh Hero" entry on the *I [Heart] Harlequin Presents* blog, one

of the respondents, CT, fills in some of the details regarding 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.”<sup>55</sup>

CT’s list is illustrative in that it both references popular associations with the war on terror (i.e., “relentless suicide bombers”) and it reads like a laundry list of sensationalist stories in the popular press about the backward customs supposedly a part of Arab and Islamic cultures (“honor killings,” sexual mutilation of girls, “old goats” taking prepubescent wives, etc.).<sup>56</sup> 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 overlook it, but today?”<sup>57</sup> 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 context of the war on terror, 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 only exists as a counterpoint to some larger argument, lie more clues about the racialization of the sheikh, a process that relies heavily on constructing his difference through orientalist perceptions of political events.

## Smart Bitches, Ghastly Sheikhs

Another way the sheikh's overt racialization makes him untenable as a hero for many readers is explained through his haunting presence within the genre as a whole. A reader discussion from a wildly popular romance review blog provides some evidence. *Smart Bitches, Trashy Books* has such a large readership that it has been featured on several news programs (including NPR's *All Things Considered*). Moreover, the original authors of the blog—Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan—have published a book, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, as a result of the success of their blog.<sup>58</sup> The popularity of *Smart Bitches* seems to be due, at least in part, to the authors' 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*.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the blog has little positive to say about sheikhs or desert romances. Given this, I was intrigued 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," SBSarah 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 period in which the novels take place. For the sake of space, I will 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. First, the readers compare the historical context in romance novels to contemporary cultural contexts that they view as atavistically still engaging in problematic customs. Second, the readers note other historical practices that are now widely condemned and considered condemnable in their own historical context as well. Both strategies 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.’”<sup>60</sup> 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 a 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.”<sup>61</sup>

Leaving aside a discussion of honor killings and a U.S. fascination with them, 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 to contemporary enlightened views about women’s rights in the U.S.-Anglo culture.<sup>62</sup> 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.”<sup>63</sup> In a classic formulation, Najida here employs the common perception of how Muslim women “have it horrible” as a counterpoint to U.S. women’s freedom and independence, as discussed in chapter 2. Indeed, these sorts of views about “Islamic states” are precisely what desert romances must overcome to achieve the optimal fantasy-reality balance. Nevertheless, the views remain a key, if submerged, presence in the characterization of the sheikh. As chapter 2 demonstrates, 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. Even so, the novels 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 [do] damn near whatever he wants to do with her, legally.<sup>64</sup>

Incidentally, nearly all of these characteristics appear in Nora Roberts's sheikh antihero novel, *Sweet Revenge*, but Erin's point is well taken in that they don't operate as elements of the sheikh-hero. Her assumption that all unions in the Middle East are both bound by Islam and 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 religiocultural differences of Middle Eastern men. The racialization works through the presence of such negative perceptions, which cast these differences as immutable.

The second strategy readers employ in the rape-in-marriage debate is, perhaps, a clearer articulation of the way common perceptions of Islam fit into the logic of racialization in the United States. In these examples, readers note that historically racist practices directed toward African and African American people 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: "Ooooookay . . . 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?"<sup>65</sup> 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?"<sup>66</sup>

Here, she uses clear and powerful examples of racist practices (that are widely understood as such) to lend credence to her overall argument. Importantly, the absolute misogyny of female genital cutting,

which is referenced by the more sensationalist term *female genital mutilation* and frequently considered a condoned practice of Islam, is compared to the absolute racism of lynching and 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 serves to racialize Arab and Muslim men through the notion of a culturally sanctioned (and even promoted) misogyny. Here, I do not wish to compare the oppressions of Arabs and Muslims with those of 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 is invoked as an absolute and quintessential marker 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 one of the only contemporary desert romances in which the sheikh-hero makes an overt reference to Allah, marking him clearly as Muslim.<sup>67</sup> While African Americans comprise approximately 40 percent of the Muslim community in the United States, 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.<sup>68</sup> 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 President Obama's middle name, Hussein. The name was constantly invoked in the lead-up to the 2008 elections, as a way of overlaying a racialized post-racial candidate with a more radioactive marker of racial difference.<sup>69</sup> This is not to say that Islam is the new black.<sup>70</sup> But Islam is operating in the contemporary U.S. context in particularly racialized ways, some of which manifest themselves through popular linkages to blackness and African American cultural movements, which hold privileged places within the racial logic of the United States.



One final link, or parallel, lies in how sheikhs operate as key ghostly presences in a wider romance genre that is primarily focused on white characters coded as representing universal experience. Here I refer not to desert romances themselves, but to the way the eclipsed 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.”<sup>71</sup>

Desert romances themselves both utilize and submerge racial notions. The increased salience of race as a category through which Arabs and Muslims are understood today in the U.S. has, as we have seen, shifted some things in the landscape of desert romances: it has made them less believable as fantasy stories for some readers and seems to have stripped the sheikhs of their headdresses on the covers of the books. The latter shift implies a larger one—that is, a shift in popular perceptions of Arab/Muslim as an ethnic or religious identity to a racial one. Within U.S. racial logic, ethnicity has sometimes functioned as a register of inclusion within whiteness, while race has more often functioned as a register of exclusion from hegemonic structures.<sup>72</sup> In actuality, ethnicity itself has a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion built into the imprecise nature of the category.<sup>73</sup> It operates as a universalist identity category upon which the U.S. founds an argument for tolerance and diversity, at the same time that ethnicity functions as a particularist identity category on the basis of which minoritarian groups struggle for rights and justice; ethnicity 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.<sup>74</sup> 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*, sets an interesting precedent for questions of race vis-à-vis the sheikh character. Widely known for its miscegenation plot, the novel nevertheless finds an intricate and clever way to negotiate the notion of race. Roughly situating Sheikh Ahmed between black and white, Hull makes the sheikh's racialization clear by having Diana (the white heroine) assume that her brother would consider him black. Referring to him as a "man of different race and colour," Diana goes as far as to imagine that her brother would categorize him in terms of the racial epithet "damned nigger," even as the novel works to position the sheikh as ambiguously raced.<sup>75</sup> At the same time that Hull emphasizes Sheikh Ahmed's racial otherness, she resolves the threat of miscegenation for her readers by revealing the sheikh to have been bred from 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.<sup>76</sup>

While miscegenation fears are allayed through a biological notion of race (Sheikh Ahmed comes from 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 culturally Arab, since he has 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 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."<sup>77</sup> 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.<sup>78</sup>

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, a phenomenon that clearly correlates with conceptions of race in contemporary desert romances.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> In a move that seems to parallel the logic of the one-drop rule, sheikhs’ bloodlines assure 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.”<sup>81</sup> 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.”<sup>82</sup> Because of his “dark features,” the heroine places 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.”<sup>83</sup>

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.”<sup>84</sup> Perhaps one reason the recourse to a biologically based notion of race is important is precisely because the stereotype of the priapic sheikh depends on the popular notion that raw sexuality is part of his nature.<sup>85</sup> 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), its function is actually a bit more ambiguous.<sup>86</sup> Though almost none of the authors who use the Spanish-ancestry technique directly name it, such ancestry implies a possible, or even probable, connection to Moorish ancestry, which simultaneously suggests Muslim ancestry and connects race with religion.<sup>87</sup>

If desert romances harbor strong articulations of race, they do so in part 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 that draws on biological and cultural characteristics in the social construction of race, several scholars have noted that in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spain, religious difference functioned in racialized ways. Regarding the mass displacement and forced conversion of Muslims and Jews during this period, Anouar Majid argues that “*limpieza de sangre*” statutes served to racialize faith, demonstrating that religious difference (even if regarded in cultural terms) could operate as a foundation for racialization.<sup>88</sup> Although the race concept followed a “path toward secularization” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, in its modern form, privileged biological and cultural difference as a way of marking race (through eugenics, scientific racism, and the idea of the civilizing mission), religious difference can still be understood as an integral factor in the construction of race.<sup>89</sup> Neither should religious difference be seen merely as a proto-racial formation. In his book *Semites*, Gil Anidjar explores the way that, regarding the categorization of Arabs and Jews, “race and religion have functioned internally and externally . . . as markers of historical shifts” continuing throughout the modern era.<sup>90</sup> Insofar as modernity can be understood as ideologically linked to the notions of 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, the dominant construction of modernity depends on religious others, who have often been conceived in racialized terms.<sup>91</sup> As Junaid Rana argues: “Race and religion commingled in the formation of modernity.”<sup>92</sup> 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 in part 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 Sheikh 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.”<sup>93</sup> 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.<sup>94</sup> This common use of the trope of civilization, then, serves as an overt means of sanitizing 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 serves as 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 sunset.”<sup>95</sup> 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 Pelligrini remark in their introduction to *Secularisms*, a “network of as-

sociations is established between religious-secular opposition and that between bondage and freedom.”<sup>96</sup>

Such an opposition can be clearly seen in the passage from *Burning Love*, in which the sheikh’s subjects are represented as if in “bondage” to their religion, while the sheikh 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 of understanding how religion operates as an implicit and unmarked signifier of race. Islam is tied to race, in part, through dominant discourses about civilization, such as Samuel Huntington’s infamous “clash of civilizations” thesis. One salient example of the connections between notions of race, civilization, and religion is in the 1944 naturalization case for an Arab immigrant. The case held that the immigrant was white because Arabs had “historically served as *transmitters* of western civilization.”<sup>97</sup> 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 the co-implication of secularism and religion.<sup>98</sup>

More to the point, perhaps, the notion of civilization works in tandem with that of secularism to produce a set of religious others, quite independently of actual religiosity. Gil Anidjar posits that “secularism is the name Christianity gave itself when it invented ‘religion’ [and] named its other or others as ‘religions.’”<sup>99</sup> The invention of religion—that is, 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 itself 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 Nora Roberts's 1989 novel *Sweet Revenge*, which invokes the image of the greedy and brutal oil sheikh popularized in the U.S. in the 1970s and into the 1980s.

Spinning a tale quite similar to the 1980s hit film *Not Without My Daughter*, the book *Sweet Revenge* chronicles the story of a white U.S. 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. The heroine is sequestered in a harem, while her husband, Abdu, takes other wives in hopes of securing a male heir. As I have argued elsewhere, 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.<sup>100</sup> 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."<sup>101</sup> Against this oppression, the white heroine in the novel 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 only possible 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."<sup>102</sup> 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."<sup>103</sup> In these formulations of the sheikh antihero and his desert kingdom, religion is certainly

a crucial aspect 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 serve to mark him as a “racial figure based in notions of universality.”<sup>104</sup> 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 Arabiastani forms of cultural dress. The sheikh's robes and headdress (as they are most often called) serve as exotic markers while simultaneously operating as 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 very last line of the novel, when she is finally able to “[take] off his robe at last.”<sup>105</sup> 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 the heroine 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” (i.e., the oil-rich Arab sheikh) or the idea that the sheikh has “got crazy money and his own private gas pump,” romance readers point to cultural dress as one element that gives him exotic appeal.<sup>106</sup> The “Sheikhs and Desert Love” website lists “when the sheikh makes a change from wearing Western style clothing to the traditional robes of his country” as one of the top five things that makes a sheikh hero so “hot.”<sup>107</sup>

As demonstrated on another site, in an entry titled “Sheiken and Stirred,” at least some fans associate the cultural dress with actors such



as Omar Sharif and figures such as T. E. Lawrence (i.e., Lawrence of Arabia), thereby both referencing an orientalist tradition and suggesting a tame, European hero to exist under his exotic garments.<sup>108</sup> 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.”<sup>109</sup> 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 the 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 mentioned earlier, in publishers’ decisions about what artwork to include on the book covers.

Prior to 2001, desert romance novels often depicted the sheikh-hero “berobed” on the cover of the book, perhaps as a way of linking to the Sharif/Lawrence fantasy. Since 2001, however, presumably because the events of September 11 in that year reignited popular U.S. association of the *kufiya* or *ghutra* and *igal* with Arab/Muslim terrorism, the book covers cease to include any cultural markers, depicting instead a generalized image of a Mediterranean (i.e., Greek, Italian, or Arab/Muslim) hero. Nevertheless, the sheikh’s cultural dress remains an integral aspect of the romance story itself, making an appearance in many, if not all, desert romances. In this respect, desert robes demonstrate the subtle interplay between overt and covert representations of race, and the way in which 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, Arabiastan 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, and when she realizes her assignment, she finds “her head full of snowy robes, the whole Lawrence of

Arabia thing.”<sup>110</sup> Other novels also reference memorable scenes from the film *Lawrence of Arabia*, even if they don’t name it. In Ryan’s *Burning Love*, for example, the author presents sheikh 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,” an image that replicates some of the iconic scenes in the film.<sup>111</sup>

In *Traded to the Sheikh*, the heroine, Emily Ross, makes sense of her surroundings through five separate references to *The Arabian Nights* and one reference to Omar Khayyam.<sup>112</sup> As indicated by the title, Emily finds herself in a potentially dangerous form of captivity at first, so her first encounter with Sheikh Zageo serves to introduce the question of racialization (but not eroticization): “His clothes—a long white under-tunic 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.”<sup>113</sup> 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 through the exoticization of the sheikh. Although I agree with the commenter who pointed to the Lawrence of Arabia fantasy as one that safely sanitizes the sheikh, the observation ignores the racial dialectics at play in the construction of 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.”<sup>114</sup> Though in this case the character is not the sheikh-hero himself, some desert romances do use the technique for the sheikh-hero. In *A Bed of Sand*, for example, the heroine describes the sheikh as “tall, broad, and desperately gorgeous, his dark skin eating up the paleness of his caftan.”<sup>115</sup> In any case, the robes highlight the perceived authenticity of the character as an exotic desert dweller or, as the former author 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 Arabiastan that seem to meld in the character of the sheikh. The signifier of the sheikh’s robes is perhaps a perfect one in the sense that it speaks to the conflated identity of the prototypical sheikh-hero. While the vague ref-

erences to Arabia quite clearly include popular orientalist representations, they also seem to reflect some amount of research on the authors' part. In other words, fictionalized Arabiastan 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 referring to a (modern) ethnic, nation-state notion of Arab (in which the Arabic language is a key aspect of what defines Arabian), the geographical region of the Arabian Peninsula takes on greater importance. Indeed, the sometimes overt and sometimes coded references to "tribal" or "Berber" dress and customs (e.g., "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.<sup>116</sup> 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.<sup>117</sup> When chauffeur 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."<sup>118</sup> The robes are almost never directly linked to religion in the novels, though there is some evidence that the clothing references Islam for at least some readers. Roberts's *Sweet Revenge* offers a salient example, since in her novel, the sheikh is the antagonist of the story. He is coded as specifically wearing "the white throbe [*sic*] and headdress of Islam."<sup>119</sup>

From just these cursory examples, it seems clear not only that the sheikh is racialized through the cultural 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 geographical region, which, in turn, calls up a ready-made set of orientalist images in the readers' minds. The signifier of "desert robes" conflates ethnic, religious, and geographical identities while blurring any direct reference to the Middle East or Islam. It therefore serves to racialize the sheikh-hero in ways that enable desert romance writers to carefully balance the tension of the

fantasy tinged with reality that readers demand at the same time that it reflects dominant racial logics of the conflated Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern/terrorist in the post-9/11 context. As described earlier, 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 clothes 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.”<sup>120</sup> 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 serves to exoticize him. Because of the dialectics between fantasy and reality in romance novels, the sociopolitical realities that his desert robes could potentially cite, or incite, for readers must always be readily submergible to the erotic fantasy around which the narrative arc revolves. For Sheikh 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.”<sup>121</sup>

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 readers. 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, the authors' use of ethnic, religious, and geographical 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 tamer, 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/Muslims/Middle Easterners in the U.S. 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."<sup>122</sup> Significantly, the sheikh-hero is most real in those private, intimate moments that he shares with the white heroine.

Liberal multiculturalism functions as a technology of imperialism through its crafting of acceptable Arabiastani subjects in the context of the war on terror, relegating those who cannot conform to a realm of social death.<sup>123</sup> Through the logic of liberal multiculturalism—an outward respect for tolerance and diversity at the expense of any meaningful engagement with difference—the sheikh is tamed and domesticated. He is crafted as a good, civilized, secular sheikh who nevertheless maintains the erotic remainder of his "big bad blade" to be unsheathed in the privacy of an intimate moment with the white heroine. In the climactic moment between Sheikh Nadim and Iseult, for example, the heroine becomes "dimly aware of something digging into her belly. Belated realization of what it must be had her pulling back for a moment to look down. Nadim followed her gaze to where his ornate dagger was still tucked into his rope belt." When he pulls it out to discard it, he stops to reconsider,

and Iseult “shivers slightly, but with anticipation, not fear.”<sup>124</sup> The sheikh has learned to use his dagger appropriately—he wields it to cut through the material of the heroine’s top, disrobing her before wantonly discarding the dagger in a dim corner of the room. In other words, his big bad blade is harnessed by the biopolitical power of a romantic coupling designed to bolster the alliance of two exceptional states bound through neoliberal imperialism—Arabiastan and the United States.

In scenes like this, desert romances demonstrate that the technology of liberal multiculturalism does not erase erotic and racial difference; rather, it domesticates the difference. The technology disciplines its subjects to be colorblind, which is a form of racial disavowal. Unsurprisingly, the conceit of this disavowal is necessarily discarded along with the sheikh’s hastily flung robes in a moment of climactic passion. Once naked, the heroine cannot help but notice the sheikh’s “dark hand [which] cupped the heavy weight of her breast. She had to bite back a moan and couldn’t look down, knowing that she might collapse altogether if she saw the darkness of his skin against the paleness of hers.”<sup>125</sup> As an erotic remainder par excellence, the sheikh’s dark, racialized absolute difference ultimately serves to suggest a kind of complementarity with the heroine’s whiteness. Safely domesticated, it can be instrumentalized in shoring up her subjectivity through the logic of classic humanist binaries. When the heroine and hero are stripped down to their elemental differences, she feels “some deeply innate feminine instinct kick.”<sup>126</sup> In other words, she comes to know herself as a true woman, and she will seek wholeness in union with the sheikh. Seeking resolution in wholeness, further explored in chapter 4, turns out to be its own exceptionalist myth. Like the technologies of security and freedom explored in chapters 1 and 2, the technology of liberal multiculturalism works by taming and domesticating desire, by putting it in its place, and by orienting subjects toward a desire that contributes to upholding the hegemonic structures in which they live.

Desert romances illustrate the integral role that desire plays in technologies of contemporary imperialism, and the deployment of these technologies in the war on terror further illuminates their expansive nature. Targeting enemy combatants through the flexible category of terrorism, the tactics of the war on terror seek to alternately kill, regulate, surveil, and discipline both from within and outside the state’s official

boundaries. The illiberal nature of these activities is justified through the covert, submerged rationales (i.e., technologies) of security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism. Together, these technologies of imperialism demonstrate how subjects can come to desire their own repression, a state that can be described more simply as desiring wholeness.