

Introduction

The Romantic Sheikh as Hero of the War on Terror

A finger of fear stroked her spine as he advanced. His look intent, he radiated such masculine force that she doubted she could stop him.

—Bonnie Vanak, *The Sword and the Sheath* (p. 260)

But even without looking directly at him she could feel the effect of the unleashed power and the blatantly sexual aura he radiated lying like a stone fist in her chest.

—Kim Lawrence, *Desert Prince, Defiant Virgin* (p. 30)

His body tightened as if in preparation for attack, his emerald eyes radiating the intent.

—Olivia Gates, *To Touch a Sheikh* (p. 74)

He was full of left-over nervous energy, enough to power his own nuclear weapons.

—Linda Conrad, *Secret Agent Sheikh* (p. 66)

A curious figure stalks the pages of a distinct subset of mass-market romance novels, aptly called desert romances. Animalistic yet sensitive, dark and sexy, this desert prince emanates manliness and raw sexual power. Though his aggressive, potent virility is common in the realm of romance novels, what makes him curious is his steady rise in popularity in the intervening years since September 11, 2001, years that have seen a concomitant, and dominant, rise in depictions of Arab masculinity as backward, particularly in relation to what is understood as a violent nature, and therefore as repulsive. In this respect, the figure of the sheikh-hero as a romantic figure demonstrates a set of ambivalent asso-

ciations that thrive on the mix of violence or danger with the thrill of pleasure and desire. Indeed, this may be why the metaphor of radiation is put to much use in desert romances. Radiation invokes a potent reservoir of seemingly endlessly available and potentially dangerous energy. It is thrilling precisely for its potency; it remains on the exciting side of danger with reassurances (built into the overall plot narrative) that the heroine and the sheikh himself ultimately know how to harness and control his radioactive energy. Despite the “finger of fear [that] stroked [the heroine’s] spine” as the sheikh-hero approaches, despite the fear that she might not be able to stop him, even if she wants to—on the contrary, perhaps because of these things—the heroine is irresistibly drawn to the sheikh-hero. In these instances, her fear activates her desire—not because romance novels particularly appeal to duped, naive women, but because the books serve as abundantly fruitful materials for investigating how desire functions, particularly in relation to potent sociopolitical realities. The “nuclear weapons” that Sheikh Tarik in *Secret Agent Sheikh* can power with his “left-over nervous energy,” it turns out, do not invoke terror in the heroine, which would be a logical response, given popular associations with Arab/Muslim men and nuclear weapons. She does not fear the sheikh-hero, because by this point in the plot, she has encountered the sheikh’s opposition—the real terrorists, who truly do seek nuclear power for evil means. The connection of the sheikh to nuclear weapons therefore serves as a way of highlighting his exceptionality. As a force of good, he has demonstrated himself to be allied with global U.S.-Anglo powers that similarly seek to vanquish the terrorists. Radiation works as a powerful metaphor in this local example because of its ambivalent associations. The sheikh can simultaneously demonstrate his link to the thrill of risk and danger, while assuring the heroine that he has the ability to control the awesome power that radiation can release.

In this way, the novels’ invocations of radiation also reference contemporary discursive associations with radiation. If unleashed by the wrong hands, radiation can be globally catastrophic. Conversely, if organized and controlled by responsible, benevolent powers, it can be harvested as an alternative energy source beyond coal and oil, ensure global stability by keeping rogue forces in check, and even function as a palliative force in specific, focused medical contexts. Such narratives suggest that people must learn to subject themselves to the terrible power of radiation,

even when they know about its potentially dangerous consequences. This book examines how people learn to submit to power through their own desire for subjugation. Radiation therefore also serves as a powerful metaphor for the larger concern of this book, which is to investigate how desire can serve as a primary engine to consolidate imperialist power, specifically in the power of the (U.S.) nation-state to wage seemingly endless war. How does desire undergird the perpetuation of the war on terror, an operation that by its very name seems to be focused exclusively on fear?

The metaphor of radiation also invokes the realities of resource scarcity (and therefore energy scarcity). Though the Middle East is most commonly associated with oil as a key natural resource, the contemporary political and military focus on nuclear enrichment and on whether the goal of enrichment is to create energy or weapons demonstrates that radiation is at least equally as important. The prospect of resource scarcity seems to operate through the mechanism of fear—energy security is figured as central to national security, which is in turn oriented toward fear through its focus on defense. Security is conceived in terms of defending against those forces that may threaten it. This idea, however, fails to acknowledge that fear cannot function as subtly and effectively as desire in manufacturing consent.¹ Hegemonic power here works by fomenting the desire for security and protection from that which is feared.

In both desert romances and mainstream narratives about the war on terror, the objects of fear are the evil forces who want to do harm to the protagonists because of their own spite, backwardness, or greed. Illuminated by the metaphor of radiation, then, desert romances demonstrate how desire works as a permeating, yet invisible, driving force of the war on terror on both a micropolitical and a macropolitical level. Stimulated by the thrill of danger, the protagonists in these stories learn that to be their own, true selves, they must subject themselves to love. While this basic plot description is characteristic of the romance genre as a whole, desert romances extend the love story to the context of the war on terror. These are love stories that play out on both the individual and the national levels—between both the sheikh-hero and the heroine and their respective countries. As the exceptional leader of his fictionalized Arab (or vaguely Middle Eastern) country, the sheikh-hero learns to love the (usually) U.S.-Anglo heroine precisely because she can help him navi-

gate an alliance with global superpowers; she, in turn, learns that subjecting oneself to the power of love is its own kind of freedom—one not captured by her liberal feminist orientation toward independence and equality. The hero and heroine's love story necessarily also plays out on the world stage; in the narrative arc of the story, their coupling will literally lead toward world peace.

One reason desert romances increased in popularity after 9/11 is that they offer a supreme narrative obstacle—ethnic and cultural differences heightened by the threat of terrorism—that the characters must overcome to achieve a happy ending to their love story. What makes the stories remarkable objects of study is not that they portray a happily-ever-after ending between a sheikh and a U.S.-Anglo heroine, but the way they do so—in the narrative choices the authors make to write successful romance novels. To be believable, the desert romances must engage with popular discourses about the war on terror, shifting the usual orientation of fear into one of desire. In orienting us toward desire, they demonstrate the war on terror, too, to be a classic, if imperialist, love story.

Anatomies of the Sheikh

The character of the sheikh in popular romance novels both borrows from and builds on the history of the figure in U.S. popular culture. Desert romances draw on multiple histories of the sheikh as a noble desert leader, as an oil-rich powerful man, and as a savage and potentially dangerous figure. A key moment of origin for the sheikh in U.S. popular culture is E. M. Hull's popular novel *The Sheik* (1919), itself a precursor of contemporary romance fiction.² The novel entered popular U.S. imagination largely through the success of the film adaptation starring Rudolph Valentino. Indeed, the caricature of the sheikh in the U.S. must be contextualized within a tradition of orientalist representations of sheikh characters in Hollywood films, such as *The Sheik*, *Son of the Sheik*, *The Thief of Bagdad*, *Harum Scarum*, and *Lawrence of Arabia*. The Egyptian actor Omar Sharif, who plays a dark, handsome Arab leader in *Lawrence of Arabia*, exemplifies the kind of sheikh-hero readers expect to find in these novels.

Desert romance authors refute the claim that the novels bear a relationship to the war on terror by explaining that they commonly deploy a

much more historically based repertoire of orientalist images. The novels often reference *The Arabian Nights*, the poetry of Omar Khayyam, and the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. The film is a clear inspiration for desert romance authors, as evinced by their references to it both on blog postings and in scenes from their novels, in which the authors often use imagery from the film (e.g., a sheikh gallops away on a horse while his white robes billow out behind him).³ While chapter 4 explores the *Lawrence of Arabia* links more fully, here it is worth noting that both Peter O'Toole (who played Lawrence in the film) and Sharif (who played Lawrence's Arab sidekick, Ali) are invoked as sex symbols for the genre, thereby representing one of the many binaries that define the sheikh.⁴ In other words, he is raced as white and marked ethnically to render him palatably exciting, just as he also balances the dichotomies of traditional versus modern, masculine versus feminine, and terrorist versus progressive leader.

In her historical and literary study of desert romances, Hsu-Ming Teo explains how the word *sheik* in English came to signify “irresistible, ruthless, masterful, and over-sexualized” because of its association with the romance genre in both literary and film iterations.⁵ Not surprisingly, therefore, the sheikh is an alpha-male hero, as are many other types of contemporary heroes. Probably the most common way of describing the sheikh's appeal is in the phrase “ruler of all he surveys.”⁶ Indeed, the description of the sheikh as an immensely powerful leader who rules over an exotic and mysterious kingdom somewhere far away is what gives readers' and writers' claims that the novels bear no relationship to the war on terror some validity. These are tropes of popular romance heroes, and the genre has employed the alpha males since long before the war on terror. Sharon Kendrick, a popular writer, puts it this way: “For me, it's the ultimate fantasy. The autocratic ruler leaping onto an enormous stallion and riding it bare-backed across the endlessly baked sands. The arrogant leader who has experienced the harshness of the unforgiving desert terrain, and has survived it. These are Sheikhs we can all recognize.”⁷

Kendrick's characterization of the desirable sheikh-hero is broadly representative of the way that other romance writers and readers detail the allure of the sheikh. She overtly describes the two key characteristics of desert sheikhs—their awesome power and its relationship to the

desert terrain—while indirectly referencing two others: that the sheikh, as “arrogant leader,” can be likened to the royal heroes of historical romances and, closely related, the sheikh’s extravagant wealth. Her characterization also illustrates the centrality of the “ruler of all he surveys” formulation, adding that his power is as limitless as the “endlessly baked sands.” The sheikh-hero “rules his world with absolute power”; he is “master and commander of all [he] surveys”; and “his word is law.”⁸ Because he is autocratic, arrogant, and practically all-powerful, he serves as a supreme alpha-male figure who is romanticized both for his power and because of the romantic tension introduced by the heroine’s unique ability to “break down all [his] barriers” and even “enslave” him.⁹

Echoing Kendrick’s description, a reader comments that her desire for the sheikh has to do with his ability to “command the desert. It takes power, determination and understanding to harness nature’s harshest landscape.”¹⁰ The reader’s comment shows that the desert is itself one of the primary characters of these novels, setting the scene for isolation and captivity as well as exoticism, mystery, and even freedom—associations explored further in chapter 2. The comment also suggests that one of the key features of desert romances, beginning with the progenitor *The Sheik*, is the need to balance an image of the sheikh as a “fierce desert man”¹¹—that is, as virile, powerful, and (dangerously) sexy—with the reassurance that through his “understanding,” he has a redeemable, softer side, which he can reveal only to the heroine. The sheikh’s hard, alpha-male quality therefore gains definition through association with a harsh natural terrain, implying that he is able to conquer both natural and social elements. In this respect, he parallels some of the qualities of a U.S. icon of masculinity, the cowboy, particularly in terms of his association with horses, an association elaborated on in chapter 2. In fact, Liz Fielding refers to the sheikh-hero as a “cowboy in robes,” thereby demonstrating how this foreign, exotic hero can nevertheless tap into romanticized notions of rugged, individualistic masculinity so central to U.S. national mythologies.¹² Like the cowboy, the sheikh is a “quintessential male” with the “look of a desert king . . . his sharp angled features, his skin bronzed from the sun and slightly grooved from the elements.”¹³

The sheikh is literally carved out and marked by the desert, which is “hot . . . but exciting” and “recklessly wild.”¹⁴ He melds with the desert, as observed by the heroine of *Desert Warrior*: “His skin was warm and

tasted faintly of the desert.”¹⁵ He also embodies the surprising contrasts of the desert landscape, which is characterized as both dangerous and beautiful. In addition to its stark, wild terrain, “the endless desert vista was an unexpected ally, tranquil and beautiful.”¹⁶ The desert is a “landscape of barren beauty, so exotic in its fierceness.”¹⁷ These descriptions all bear out author Kate Walker’s assertion that what romance readers want is “the handsome, stunning, charismatic man, strong, isolated, totally in control, even in the wild and dangerous terrain of the desert.”¹⁸ Yet the depictions also indicate more. They demonstrate that the sheikh figure is defined by structuring binaries—he is commanding and powerful, yet uniquely vulnerable to the heroine; he represents both danger and tranquility; he is savage and primal (in bed), yet refined and civilized as a leader. The importance of these dichotomies—and the sheer volume of them—is a defining aspect of the anatomy of the sheikh, a point that will be fleshed out in chapter 4.

The sheikh, no doubt, is eroticized through the idea of his absolute difference. While his civilized nature is always exposed over the course of the romantic narrative, his cultural difference provides a reservoir of mystery and allure. The heroine is drawn to him because “deep in his heart is a cultural darkness she feels she’ll never be able to penetrate.”¹⁹ Moreover, the sheikh is the only Mediterranean (or European) hero to be “exotic and just down right different. In the end, the Greeks and Venetians [*sic*] and Londoners and Italians, they are exotic, but still 100% Western, so not a whole lot different.”²⁰ He is therefore “like a Latin or Greek lover squared” since he “alone carries an air of mystery and romance that was once the prerogative of royalty, the rich. He is different. Exotic in manner and dress. Unfathomable.”²¹

The increased mainstream U.S.-Anglo perception of Arabs and Muslims (and anyone perceived to be Muslim) as radically different after the events of 9/11, therefore, helps explain the rise in popularity of desert romances. Sheikh-heroes are a stock character in the romance industry, which received a sudden and massive infusion of exposure highlighting some of the very qualities that define these characters as alpha-male exotic heroes—their difference, danger, and impenetrability. As implied by the comment about other Mediterranean (and British) heroes being “100% Western,” an important aspect of the sheikh’s difference relies on the idea that he is ethnically or racially different, another aspect of his

difference that has been highlighted and exaggerated in the aftermath of 9/11 (see chapter 3). If Hull's novel *The Sheik* allayed miscegenation fears by ultimately revealing the sheikh to hail from European ancestry, contemporary desert romances rely on marking the sheikh-hero as ethnically Arab or Middle Eastern, since his otherness is a crucial element of his alpha-male identity, even if he is ethnically mixed.

Indeed, the power of the desert as exotic setting serves to racialize sheikh characters, even when they "look alarmingly Western" or seem to doubt their own authenticity, as is the case with Loreth Anne White's David Rashid.²² The ethnicity of these sheikh-heroes is sometimes specified: Rashid has an English mother and an "Arabic" father.²³ Penny Jordan's character Xander is half "Zuranese" and half "western."²⁴ And Emma Darcy's Zageo is, stunningly, Portuguese, Arab, Indian, British, and French.²⁵ But crucially, the racialization of these characters comes through vague, exoticized markers like the desert itself, cultural dress, or marriage customs. Because most of the novels are set in fictionalized Arabia (like Xander's "Zuran"), desert romances utilize a mix of ethnic and religious markers that tend to get racialized and conflated as "Arabian."²⁶ Xander, for instance, who is "Zuranese," is eventually named as Tuareg, which would identify him as ethnically Amazigh (Berber) rather than Arab.

The character of the sheikh in desert romances does not represent actual ethnic and religious categories, because the distinctions among these categories do not matter. What matters is that he is redeemable as a believable hero by having enough Western characteristics to balance out his exotic difference, which manifests itself in a way that echoes the fluidity and conflation of ethnic-religious markers in the popular discourse on the war on terror. If the quintessential figure of the terrorist is vaguely Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian, or some mix of popular perceptions of these categories, then the prototypical sheikh-hero is signified as vaguely or abstractly Mediterranean.

According to Linda Conrad, a popular romance writer, the appeal of the sheikh is linked to his ability to evince atavistic qualities. Here again, his ability to straddle the binary is key. As a modern hero, he has "one foot in the old and one in the new," which allows an elaboration of those elements of romantic fantasy that tend to invoke tradition, like notions of chivalry or the dedication to one's family and country.²⁷ As an im-

portant counterpoint to his danger, the sheikh is consistently portrayed as duty- or honor-bound, a characteristic that is normalized through a culturalist (and orientalist) logic, which understands Middle Eastern culture to be defined by its adherence to quaint notions of honor. Sheikh Jamal, for instance, explains to the heroine that “in [his] country [he] would be honor-bound to marry any woman [he] deflowered,” and Sheikh Tarik invokes his culture’s “code of honor” when railing against a misogynist statement made by a peer.²⁸ When Molly, the heroine in *Desert Prince, Defiant Virgin*, tells Sheikh Tair that he has a “warped sense of medieval family honour,” he shoots back that “though modern society does not acknowledge it, there is such a thing as the right things and duty and service.”²⁹ As these quotes demonstrate, sheikhs are cast as uniquely able to embody medieval notions of chivalry and tradition, while eventually proving to be nostalgically medieval, rather than oppressively, backwardly so.

Indeed, sheikh-heroes are uniquely able to do so in a modern era in which such notions have regrettably fallen out of favor, according to the romance industry. Consider Keira Gillett’s blog post, “Kiss Prince Charming Good-Bye: Say Hello to the Sheikh!” in which she explains that “the sheikh is a modern prince in an age when there aren’t enough eligible princes to go around.”³⁰ Beginning her blog post with the lament that “Prince William [is] now . . . off the market,” she immediately turns to the crown prince of Dubai, Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, whom she credits with “inspiring authors to write sheikh romances as we speak.” In another blog, Gillett expresses a similar sentiment:

Sheik romance like Paranormal romance has risen in the last few years. In an age where chivalrous princes are nearly nonexistent, Sheik romance offers a modern prince to romance readers. He’s a little bit wild, more than a little dangerous, but very much in love with his heroine. Combine this irresistible masculine force with the exotic (most times fantastical and fictional) lands of Africa, the Middle East, and the East and it’s magic in the making.³¹

Adding to the lure of the sheikh-prince is the idea that contemporary European princes have lost some of their fantasy appeal because they

are so “common,” as one romance author put it—that is, one sees them getting married and doing everyday things. With a plethora of princes—five thousand in the Saudi kingdom alone, according to *National Geographic*—and a faraway, exotic locale, however, the Gulf region of the Middle East provides fodder for romantic fantasy, especially because “no one really knows what they are doing,” as one romance writer told me.³² While this offhanded remark suggests that the sheikh is defined as mysterious and exotic, the references to the Gulf region of the Middle East invoke a final defining characteristic of the sheikh—his fabulous wealth.

Creating Arabiastan

Desert romances paint a picture of Arabia that incorporates many elements of the Gulf region in the Middle East, probably because of the standard romance trope of the extraordinarily wealthy, elite, debonair hero. As one romance reader explains, the riches are part of the “fun fantasy” of the sheikh: “Private jets, helicopters, fabulous cars, palaces. You can give them anything.”³³ Not only are sheikh-heroes largely cast as modern-day princes, but they are also often cast as leaders of newly oil-rich nations, which consequently demonstrate what SBSarah calls the “utter glitz” of places like Dubai.³⁴

Significantly, none of the desert romances claim the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as their setting, and very few of them take place in an actual Middle Eastern country. The vast majority of stories take place in a fictionalized Arab country, and those that name an actual existing country are usually historical romances (taking place at least a century ago, and often earlier) or were published before 2001. Some desert romance writers explain that inventing the sheikh’s country is part of the fun. Abby Green, for example, explains that she “had so much fun writing *Breaking the Sheikh’s Rules* because [she] got to create a fictional land where anything was possible.”³⁵ Indeed, it is because sheikh-heroes exist in a completely distinct world that they have been compared to vampires, werewolves, and other paranormal heroes.³⁶ During interviews, another reason writers give for creating a fictionalized country is their concern that they “would get something wrong and offend someone or someone’s religion” and a sense that it would be impossible to get all the details correct.³⁷

While these are undoubtedly compelling reasons, they do not explain the virtual explosive growth of fictionalized Arabia since 2001. Kate Walker gets closer to an explanation for this phenomenon: “As a writer a Sheikh book is a gift—you get to create your own exotic country, a setting with the huge expanse of the desert. . . . And you can invent your own history, customs, traditions. . . . Writers take the best of the culture, avoiding religious or other problems, and they can show that there are Sheikhs to admire and trust, not just the image that the reports of terrorism etc. might show.”³⁸

Running the gamut of reasons for creating a fictionalized Arabia, Walker nevertheless must acknowledge that desert romances cannot be set in the actual Middle East, because the majority of her audience believes that the realities of the region are incompatible with romantic fantasy. Romance writer Teresa Southwick puts it more bluntly (one is tempted to say, puts it more honestly): “I avoided any hint of ‘Arab’ as I was concerned that could be a turnoff to readers. And I made up the country so no research was involved. That way it could be anything I wanted and no one could say I’d made a mistake.”³⁹

Considering that one of the hallmarks of a good romance writer is the ability to get the historical and cultural details of the chosen setting right, it is significant that the majority of contemporary desert romance writers decide to create a fictionalized setting.⁴⁰ It suggests that the Middle East is a highly sensitive topic for readers and represents a setting that writers could not possibly get right while maintaining a successful fantasy story. As Marguerite Kaye explains: “The world I’ve created in my Princes of the Desert trilogy is—hands up—pure fantasy, and of course I’ve had to tread lightly over some very real cultural conflicts.”⁴¹

In light of the fictionalization of the Arab world in desert romance novels and the fact that the novels combine elements from non-Arab countries in their descriptions (particularly of Iran and Turkey), I use the term *Arabiastan* to refer to the imagined geopolitical territory to which the romances refer. *Arabia* is a fairly antiquated term that now serves mostly as an adjective for a particular breed of horses or for the French and English translations of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Of course, it does also refer to the Arabian Peninsula, of which Saudi Arabia is a part. Though it is the accepted term for the region, it was created in the orientalist spirit. The Arabic term designating the country

of Saudi Arabia is simply *al-Saudiyya*, referring to the ruling family's name (for obvious reasons, the adjective *Arabia* is unnecessary). In romancelandia, "Arabia" therefore serves to represent a vague, imagined orientalist landscape, as evinced by the map of "fictional Arabia" on the website "Sheikhs and Desert Love," which includes many of the fabricated countries that appear in desert romances.⁴²

My inclusion of the suffix *-stan* is meant to invoke the way that Pakistan and Afghanistan are included in the popular U.S. imagination of the Middle East, as a result of the geopolitics of the war on terror. Etymologically, the suffix means "land" in both Urdu and Persian, rendering it a plausible term that is also meant to signal its own dissonance. My inclusion of the suffix *-stan* is also meant to signal Iran's inclusion in the fictionalized landscape, both in its war-on-terror association and its orientalist (Persian) connotations, an intention materialized by P. T. Barnum's orientalist villa called Iranistan, which was built in the mid-1850s in Connecticut. Therefore, Arabiastan broadly refers to two main phenomena: First, the conflation of Arab and other Islamicate countries in the idea of the Middle East that is invoked by the war on terror (e.g., both the idea that Pakistan and Afghanistan are part of the Middle East, despite the fact that they are Central or South Asian countries, and the conflation of Iranians with Arabs). Second, Arabiastan captures the fantastical, orientalist imagery that helps to shape the fictionalized landscape of the novels. For example, the sheikh's quarters are often lavishly appointed with Persian rugs.⁴³ As mentioned earlier, the heroines are sometimes reminded of Persian poet Omar Khayyam or of the *Arabian Nights*.⁴⁴ Moreover, descriptions of the women's quarters sometimes invoke the imagery of a Turkish (Ottoman) harem.⁴⁵ As Annie West explains, the potential settings of "desert strongholds, romantic oases, and sprawling palaces" are part of what makes them fun to write: "For background colour there are silk carpets, souks, glittering jewels and an exotic 'Arabian Nights' aura."⁴⁶

Despite romance writers' likely genuine worries about their ability to get the details of Middle Eastern culture right, this concern is probably not the only—or even the main—reason for the widespread creation of Arabiastan. Were the writers to set their novels in actual Middle Eastern countries, popular perceptions of these countries as war-torn, backward, third-world countries with horrible policies that oppress women and

gay people would overwhelm the nostalgic set of orientalist associations. Even the countries associated with oil wealth and “utter glitz,” rather than war, nevertheless also stand out as examples of kingdoms defined by their oppression of women. Such an impression would deflate the fantasy and detract from the lush, orientalist setting. The Gulf region of the Middle East nevertheless serves as a point of inspiration for Arabiastan, suggesting that in the world of desert romance, the lines between fictional and actual narratives of the region become blurred.

Indeed, it is especially in the blurry moments that readers’ notions of reality can grate against the core of the desert romance fantasy. As one reader quips: “The guy who sells me gyros is exotic? And the power of the attraction of sheikhs left me a long time ago considering the third class citizenship women have in many countries of the middle east. Probably not even third.”⁴⁷ Responding to a comment asserting that the appeal of the sheikh is his exoticism, this reader considers the image of the sheikh inseparable from that of the oppressive and irredeemable patriarch. She also cuts the desert prince fantasy down to size, tying the image of the sheikh to “the guy who sells [her] gyros,” an allusion that sutures Arabiastani masculinity to a working-class immigrant subjectivity inside the U.S.-Anglo context. Even as they discuss the sheikh’s characteristics that make them swoon, fans of the desert romance are often careful and quick to note that they “wouldn’t want to meet a real one!”⁴⁸

When Fantasy Grates against Reality

In Winstead Jones’s *The Sheik and I*, Sheikh Kadin and heroine Cassandra take “one last kiss, before reality returns.”⁴⁹ One is reminded of both the suffocating presence of too much reality surrounding the topic of desert romances and how desert romance writers must navigate readers’ perceptions of the gory realities of Arabiastan—realities that constantly threaten to overwhelm the fantasy of the romance. Because of the realities that make the idea of the sheikh unappealing for some fans of the romance genre, certain story elements must be carefully avoided by the authors and are simply disavowed by fans of the genre. In an online inquiry about the appeal of the sheikh-hero, one fan, Angela, explains on the *All About Romance* blog: “The sheik for me represents mystery and exoticness. He is tall, dark, and dangerous. He is different from me

physically and culturally. He is a man's man and knows what he wants and takes it. For me the sheik is pure fantasy and nothing I would want in real life, but then so are most heroes in romanceland."⁵⁰

This reader reaffirms the commonly desired elements of the sheikh (exoticism, aggression, mystery, and, in short, a radically different other) while introducing a key point. Many readers would agree that their preferred heroes—whether in the wealthy Mediterranean category, like Greek and Italian billionaires, or in the paranormal category, like vampires and werewolves, or in the historical category, like rogues and rakes—would not be desirable in real life, and readers would no doubt question the reading of these romances to assess how they portray the reality of the Middle East. Yet what is so interesting about the popularity of desert romances at this particular historical moment is precisely their negotiations of fantasy and reality. In these negotiations, the proximity of desire and disgust—the kind of colonial ambivalence discussed by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha—becomes apparent. Two other comments in the *All About Romance* thread will help clarify. Agreeing with Angela, LyndaX writes: “The great thing about Romancelandia is that it rewrites all reality. It’s just that the sheik reality is too close to you (which you already knew), plus it’s harder these days, with terrorists and because we know too much. . . . As to their appeal, I think Angela nailed it. There is something about a man who is unshackled by convention who is so overwhelmed by a woman that he must have her. In real life, he’s a sociopathic rapist, but in romances, he’s a hero.”⁵¹ Another interlocutor puts it less provocatively to concur that the “flip side and reality of [the fantasy] is obviously very dark.”⁵²

The nonchalant suggestion that real-life sheikhs—Arabs—are “sociopathic rapists” and “obviously very dark” belies some key differences between the sheikh-hero and other types of alpha-male heroes in the romance genre. Whereas some heroes—like werewolves or rakes—can be objects of fantasy at the same time that readers wouldn’t want to encounter them in real life, these figures don’t suffer from a surfeit of reality. That is, romance readers don’t claim to “know too much” about these characters’ real-life attributes, because the characters exist entirely within the fantasy realm—either because they do not actually exist (paranormals), they existed in the distant past (rogues and rakes), or they are still considered Western with an exotic twist (Italians and

Greeks). Precisely for this reason—because desert romances, to operate as fantasy narratives, must combat what the general reader thinks she already knows about the reality of the Middle East—they offer a wealth of information about the collisions of desire, fear, identification, and fantasy in popular U.S.-Anglo engagements with Arabiastani masculinity. Particularly because they engage directly with the theme of the war on terror, the novels demonstrate how desire for and identification with the sheikh can operate as a critical aspect of how the war on terror functions.

A common trope in desert romances is to feature weapons of mass destruction, uranium-enriching villains, and terrorist plots to overthrow sheikh-heroes who foster good relationships with the United States.⁵³ One of the best examples of this is Loreth Anne White's *The Sheik Who Loved Me* (2005), in which an American spy, Jayde Ashton, falls in love with Sheikh David Rashid. Like Hull's hero in *The Sheik*, Rashid is part English, and this fact of birth functions in the narrative to crucially distinguish him from the prototype of the cruel, savage Arab, namely, his half-brother Tariq. The half-brother is involved in a plot to enrich uranium so that his rebel group can develop nuclear capabilities, which the heroine refers to as "weapons of mass destruction."⁵⁴ In just these few details, one can clearly see that the novel is in conversation with contemporaneous mainstream coverage of the war on terror and, more particularly, the Iraq war, with its reference to rogue states attempting to develop nuclear capabilities and its direct mention of WMDs. Significantly, the sheikh-hero becomes a desirable figure precisely because he leads peace negotiations or diplomatic efforts to quell tensions between backward warring tribes or peoples, and he specifically seeks U.S.-Anglo support to do so. Examples of this trope abound. Sheikh Zahid pours a lot of money "into a world peace project," while Sheikh Kazim is involved in international peace talks.⁵⁵ Sheikh Xander is even "put forward for the Nobel Peace Prize" as a result of his work setting up a "student exchange between Middle Eastern and European students so that each might better understand the other."⁵⁶ Sheikh-heroes in desert romances represent a critically underrepresented figure who nevertheless plays a key role in the war on terror—the figure of the good sheikh, the exceptional ally to U.S.-Anglo imperialist powers.

One reader touches on a defining characteristic of the good-sheikh subjectivity when she suggests that sheikh-heroes are "popular because

there's so much to reform."⁵⁷ The white heroine is often portrayed as the primary agent of the sheikh's reform, and when she succeeds in capturing his heart, bringing him to his knees and reforming him, she is rewarded with the prize of becoming his "one woman harem."⁵⁸ The sheikh-hero is often portrayed as battling regressive elements in his own country in order to bring it in line with the new global economy; aligning his country with the new world order is a critical aspect of his reformation.

Given the common defense of romance novels as feminist—that is, their tendency to feature a strong, independent heroine and to focus on her pleasure—a common subtheme of desert romances focuses on the sheikh's desire for progressive women's rights and his need for a strong heroine to help him achieve such a cultural shift. Though this description of a sheikh may seem atypical in comparison with predominant images of the Arab-Muslim terrorist, it actually quite closely resembles popular nonfiction characterizations of the people of the Arabian Peninsula or the Gulf region of the Middle East. Here again, the boundaries between fantasy and reality begin to blur. Recall the previously mentioned blogger's reference to a real desert prince (the crown prince of Dubai) as a means of delineating the fictional sheikh-hero's desired qualities. While her description of the crown prince is animated by classic (orientalist) associations of the Middle East with opulence and luxury, it notably elides the most popular contemporary association of terrorism with Arab masculinity. Here, the blogger's silences are just as descriptive (if not more so) as her assertions regarding the attractiveness of the sheikh. Romance readers' and writers' online comments about desert romances overwhelmingly insist that the subgenre's popularity in recent years bears no relationship to the contemporaneous war on terror. Instead, the readers and writers point to classic yet vague notions of decadent, exotic oil kingdoms and the powerful masculine rulers as the quintessential heroes of this thriving subgenre of romance novels.⁵⁹

Even if sheikh-heroes are simply updated representations of classic orientalist figures, though, these classic representations were certainly not all positive. While contemporary romance novel sheikhs and sultans do clearly reference the legacy of classic Hollywood film sheikhs, the books are perhaps more immediately linked to the image of the oil sheikh, a U.S.-based concept that appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Oil

sheikh images emerged in a moment of greatly intensified political conflict between the U.S. and the Middle East, and they reintroduced orientalist stereotypes about the Ottoman Empire, which cast the harem as a prison-like space for women who were, by nature, at the mercy of brutal or greedy patriarchal figures. Desert romances that utilize the orientalist trope of the harem as a sexualized setting therefore tend to either situate the novel historically, during the Ottoman Empire, to play on the stereotype of the Terrible Turk (as in Nan Ryan's *Burning Love*), or they invoke the greedy, lascivious oil sheikh stereotype through a villainous character from whom the heroine must be rescued. While contemporary desert romances tend to steer clear of the volatile harem image since it is understood to be inherently oppressive to women, its framing of women as sex slaves can be recuperated by authors who choose to make a point about how the heroine has inspired the sheikh to correct this practice, as in the previous example about the one-woman harem. In this case, authors can draw on the edgy fantasy of being a sex slave while assuring readers that the fantasy will not spill outside the boundaries of civilized, monogamous, bourgeois coupling. Like the use of the radiation metaphor in the epigraph that begins this chapter, authors can draw on the power of orientalist stereotypes to create potent, dangerous, and sexy alpha male sheikh-heroes, even if these heroes will ultimately be domesticated by the romantic narrative.

Harems play into what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call the “rape and rescue fantasy,” as the oil sheikh is often represented as particularly desirous of white women.⁶⁰ Thus, the appearance of the oil sheikh character in the 1970s and 1980s primarily signified the increasing antagonism between the U.S. and the Middle East. As a symbol that is clearly tied to the 1973 oil embargo and heralded by globalization scholar David Harvey as one of the defining events for the shift into late capitalism, the oil sheikh caricature is a precursor to images of the terrorist figure.⁶¹ Both are portrayed as hyperpatriarchal, as antagonistic to Western powers, and as the dark or destructive underbelly of globalization, where globalization is understood in universalized (Eurocentric) ways. Desert romances set in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s especially invoke this figure, usually in the character of the villain or antihero, as exemplified by Nora Roberts's *Sweet Revenge*, in which the villain Abdu “wanted the money and technology the West would bring, even while

he detested Westerners for providing them.”⁶² The image of an extremist Islamic regime prominent in the 1980s—an image arising from the Iranian revolution and the concomitant hostage crisis—still holds purchase not only in representations of terrorists but also in the image of the rogue regime that seeks to develop nuclear weapons by enriching uranium. The salient metaphor of oil for Arabiastan therefore morphs into the more potent metaphor of radiation, which permeates popular associations with the region even if it is not explicitly named.

Perhaps because of this representational transition, contemporary desert romances rehabilitate the once-feared or disparaged oil sheikh as a desirable hero. In so doing, the novels use the allied leaders of the Gulf region of the Middle East as their template, reforming the sheikh into an alluring fantasy figure by shaping his gender politics to align with liberal feminist goals and transforming him into a good, liberal, humanist subject. The new, reformed sheikh is characterized by his precarious positioning as a leader who seeks to find the perfect balance between tradition and modernity. As opposed to the greedy, oppressive oil sheikhs of the 1970s and 1980s, these new desert princes are honorable leaders of newly oil-rich countries seeking to use their newfound riches to reform and modernize their countries, while battling the primitive, backward factions of their population who, like Abdu, “detest Westerners.”

Importantly, romance writers have not invented the character of the good sheikh; they have a wealth of nonfictional representations on which to draw and which paint the picture of the fraught leader of allied Gulf countries. Consider, for example, a featured spread on Saudi Arabia in *National Geographic*, which includes this lead: “Torn between ancient traditions and the modern world, Saudis search for balance in the post-9/11 glare.”⁶³ The article displays the usual mix of *kufiya*-wearing men wielding swords (e.g., the front-cover image of a sword dance at a camel festival), *kufiya*-wearing men at a “camel beauty contest,” the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina filled with praying men, a light-studded Riyadh at night (more specifically of an “ultramodern hotel and complex”), and an aerial view of a sea of cars parked haphazardly in the desert “where camels once trekked.” Such juxtaposition of traditional and modern is a common trope in *National Geographic*, and it dominates every aspect of the article. It describes, for example, “the clash between borrowed modernization and threatened traditions,” which, it argues,

are “the root crisis from which a forest of others has sprung.”⁶⁴ Though it never explains from whom modernization is “borrowed,” the rhetoric of the sentence, as representative of the entire article, invokes the classic clash-of-civilizations argument by continuously associating Islam with backwardness and tradition (e.g., “Today Saudi Arabia is at the center of a cultural and geopolitical maelstrom, where Islam meets the modern world”) and by linking modernization with the United States.⁶⁵

While chapter 1 makes the case for the applicability of *National Geographic* magazine to desert romances, the example presented here serves two purposes. It highlights the imbrication of nonfictional discourses about Arabiastan with the fictional desert romance narratives, demonstrating the complex intertextuality between fantasy and reality. Perhaps more importantly, though, the *National Geographic* example helps emphasize the sheikh-hero as a key underrepresented aspect of the war on terror. The war on terror is not only fought in opposition to the violent, backward terrorist, but also fought in alliance with the good sheikh. In other words, the war on terror is constructed not only in terms of fear of the other, but also in terms of desire, where the desire for the other is just one particularly salient manifestation of the way desire works to uphold the architecture of the war on terror. The story of how the heroine comes to desire the desert sheikh turns out to symbolize how desire functions as an engine for contemporary U.S. imperialism as manifested in the war on terror. Her desire for the sheikh-hero leads her to be willingly, rapturously captured and contained by him in ways that are remarkably similar to contemporary technologies of U.S. imperialist power, which have been crafted and honed during the war on terror. The sheikh-hero represents an oasis of security in a chaotic world of danger and terrorism. The heroine desires to be captured and contained by him to feel safe, even ironically referring to her willing submission to her overwhelming love for him as a kind of freedom. Her willingness to stay in Arabiastan with the sheikh is often justified through the logic of the imperialist technology of liberation—she vows to help the sheikh foster women’s equality in his modernizing (i.e., civilizing) nation. Moreover, their union is meant to be symbolic of the exceptionalist technology of liberal multiculturalism, where ethnic and cultural differences are commodified and capitalized into spicy details that give the exceptional-universalist power its flavor. The way that romance writers

are forced to justify the U.S.-Anglo heroine's desire for an Arabiastani sheikh illustrates a micropolitics of desire that simultaneously resonates at the macropolitical level of imperialism. The heroine's desire for the good sheikh echoes contemporary modes of imperialism, which cast the imperialist project as a benevolent force by cultivating subjects' desires for security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism. In short, desert romances reveal that contemporary (benevolent) imperialism is a love story, whose primary driving force is desire.

Reading the Desert Romance as an Allegory of U.S. Exceptionalism

In her recent book, *Desert Passions*, Hsu-Ming Teo describes the characterization of sheikh-heroes in desert romances as “ameliorative representations” of Muslim masculinity, which have the potential to “temper negative stereotypes,” particularly “given the scarcity of alternative representations of Muslim men in Western popular culture.”⁶⁶ While she corroborates the assertion that desert romances depict Arabiastani masculinities that are not widely represented in U.S.-Anglo popular culture, Teo nevertheless reads this phenomenon through a liberal multiculturalist lens, where representations coded as positive are understood as the antidote to negative representations. This general sentiment is echoed by Erika Wittlieb, creator of the “Sheikhs and Desert Love” website. In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, she argues that desert romances present positive portrayals of Arab masculinity against a sea of negative stereotypes.⁶⁷ She makes this claim despite the fact that not only is the sheikh-hero animalistic and aggressive, but his positive, sensitive qualities are manifested only in relation to the prototype of the evil, uranium-enriching half-brother (or another such stereotype).⁶⁸ The claim rests on the assumption that while negative stereotypes are bad, they can be combatted by positive images; but this claim elides the fact that stereotypes are strengthened—not weakened—by the binary structure of negative and positive representation.⁶⁹

Perhaps more importantly, though, the valorization of the good sheikh relies on an exceptionalist logic; he is exceptional in the sense of being a uniquely modern and progressive Arabiastani leader. As a civilized leader allied with U.S.-Anglo powers, he is also uniquely situ-

ated to uphold the universalizing principles of a liberal multicultural logic, where the assimilation and appropriation of difference becomes the way of demonstrating equality. Teo inadvertently inscribes the good sheikh within an exceptionalist-universalizing discourse when she lauds the recent “ameliorative” depictions of him in contemporary desert romances as “humanizing” representations that “affirm readers’ willingness to believe in the power of romantic love to breach cross-cultural, interracial, and interreligious boundaries and to integrate the Arab or Muslim other into modern Western societies.”⁷⁰ Framing readers’ willingness to integrate Arabiastani masculinities into “modern Western societies” through the logic of exceptionalism belies its positive impact; the accolades for integration here are attributed to the U.S.-Anglo societies themselves for their willingness to accept the reformed sheikhs.

Indeed, the narrative of exceptionalism is fundamental to the architecture of U.S. imperialism, where exceptionalism refers both to the idea of the U.S. as uniquely universalist and to the idea that an imperialist state often operates in a state-of-exception mode. The former—unique universalism—functions through the kinds of liberal multiculturalist logics so far described in relation to the good sheikh as well as through the claim of sexual liberation, both of which communicate the idea that the U.S. is constantly progressing toward the ideal of equality for all. This conceit, in turn, provides the moral justification for attacking other countries because of their egregious human-rights records. The state of exception pardons the outwardly hegemonic manifestations of imperialism (like domestic surveillance and the suspension of some civil rights) as necessary precisely because of the uniquely democratic and benevolent nature of U.S. imperialism. This “they hate us for our freedom” attitude asserts that because the U.S. is targeted for its exceptional qualities, the nation must sometimes take extreme measures to protect itself.

Even if some manifestations of imperialism look different in the contemporary U.S. formulations, its ideological structure remains remarkably similar to many of its predecessors, particularly those of the formal colonial era. As Ann Stoler points out, despite the narrative of exceptionalism, the self-creation of the imperialist power as a state of exception operates more obviously as a rule than as a distinguishing characteristic.⁷¹ Indeed, following Edward Said, she argues that “*discourses of exceptionalism are part of the discursive apparatus of empires*

*themselves.*⁷² Discourses of exceptionalism enable the imperial state to manage a set of paradoxes. One paradox is the claim of newness by or on behalf of empires—for example, the claim that the U.S. is only pushed to wield an imperialist form of power because of its altruistic, humanitarian impulses to assist downtrodden peoples and countries. Here, the idea is that even as the appellation of *empire* came to be accepted as a descriptor for the U.S., the term only became acceptable because the U.S. is a reluctant and decidedly *new* form of empire—one that only operates as such because of its unique ability to spread freedom and democracy. As Stoler suggests: “We might step back and ask not only what is new (as many have), but why ‘newness’ is always a part of imperial narratives.”⁷³ Newness seems to operate as a means of disavowing one’s own imperialist formation. While the “new” imperial power may begrudgingly acknowledge that it is, indeed, operating as an empire, it nevertheless claims that it does so with altruistic, rather than hegemonic, aims. Newness becomes the cover under which subtle neo-imperialist forms of power hide.

This paradox is inextricably linked to another—the implication that the exceptional state distinguishes itself from a whole host of other, now universalized (i.e., generalized) states at the same time that the exceptional state claims to uniquely demonstrate true universal (i.e., liberal-humanitarian) values. In his influential essay on U.S. exceptionalism, Daniel Rodgers notes how a narrative of exceptionalism eschews difference, an interesting point given the importance of difference to national U.S. mythologies: “When difference is put in exceptionalist terms, in short, the referent is universalized.”⁷⁴ Such universalizing of (all) others builds the claim of exception, despite its being a claim of exceptionality based on the imperial state’s exemplary embodiment of supposedly universal values. Amy Kaplan concisely describes the paradoxical “claim of the United States to uniqueness and universality at the same time” as “the tenacious paradigm of American exceptionalism.”⁷⁵ It is a paradox that is neatly embodied by the good sheikh, who is uniquely equipped to reinforce exceptional-universalist ideals through alliance with U.S.-Anglo powers.

Narrating Benevolent Technologies of Imperialism

Through the critical subjectivity of the good sheikh, desert romances provide a means of investigating the ways that contemporary U.S. imperialism operates undercover. Between the lines of desert romances, one can read what Jodi Kim calls a Cold War epistemology—a way of “making sense of the world through the Manichaeic logics and grammars of good and evil.”⁷⁶ The good sheikh-hero and the evil Arabiastani terrorist manifest this sort of logic in the desert romances themselves; the novels concisely illustrate the way that imperialism necessitates the construction of a clearly and simply evil other who must be defeated by the morally righteous exceptional state. The Cold War epistemology functions through new technologies of empire, such as neoliberal economic policies, proxy wars, and the tyranny of humanitarianism. These technologies hide under the cover of humanitarianism and operate through covert and proxy military means.

If the Cold War can be understood as “a genealogy of American empire,” as Jodi Kim argues, it marks some critical features in the historical transition of imperialist formations. More than simply signaling a shift away from formal territorial colonization and toward (neocolonial) political, economic, and military hegemony, U.S. imperialist formations after the Cold War refigure the relationship of militarism to empire in key ways.⁷⁷ Rather than just providing the forceful means to appropriate new resources, the military and, more broadly, the defense industry operates as a new resource and engine for capitalism through the military-industrial complex.⁷⁸ The military also becomes a crucial tool for installing and deploying neoliberal economic policies, as exemplified in Naomi Klein’s formulation of the “shock doctrine.”⁷⁹ Most importantly, the role of the military is refigured so as to (mostly) successfully eclipse the global hegemon—the U.S. imperialist state—as a major aggressive actor. A prime example is the proliferation of proxy wars, the most common kind of warfare during the Cold War, whose legacy can be clearly seen in the current war on terror through the example of Afghanistan. U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan during the height of the Cold War was hidden under the cover of proxy engagement—the funding of *mujahidin* forces—and the covert nature of such proxy engagement later enabled the “why do they hate us” argument. Terror-

ist actions against the U.S. could then be presented as disengaged from historical and political context and widely construed as the actions of evildoers who simply hated the liberal humanist way of life.

Further, though the action is skillfully obscured, the U.S. does formally (territorially) colonize many parts of the world through its extensive network of military bases.⁸⁰ The network provides a concrete example of what Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan call “scattered hegemonies.”⁸¹ The sheikh-heroes in desert romances lead Arabiastani countries that remarkably resemble long-standing U.S. allies in the region—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE—that host key strategic military bases, as explored in chapter 1. In perhaps the most twisted aspect of the refiguring of militarism in contemporary imperialist formations, militarism has also installed itself as the new form of humanitarianism, particularly through the selective deployment of a human rights framework to force regime change in countries that are strategically important to the United States.⁸² A good example of the conflation of militarism and humanitarianism once again takes us to Afghanistan, where, in the early days of the U.S. invasion, the U.S. dropped food aid that was nearly indistinguishable from the cluster bomblets being concurrently dropped.⁸³

Though the U.S. has clearly used overt forms of imperialism as a tactic in the war on terror—for example, in the invasion and occupation of Iraq—desert romances perhaps inadvertently chart some of the more covert tactics of the “new” contemporary U.S. imperialism, namely, the tactics coded with positive or humanitarian connotations. As manifested in desert romances, these tactics generally fall into three broad technologies: security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism (see chapters 1, 2, and 3, respectively). There are several reasons for using the term *technology* as a rubric here—reasons especially clarified for me during a class I taught about contemporary technologies of imperialism.⁸⁴ Perhaps most obviously, the term *technology* suggests a mechanism or an apparatus of empire—a way of functioning. In addition, though, the term clearly signals that no direct, unidirectional form of power emanates from a clear intent. Moreover, the technology serves something that is larger than itself, and the subjects (or targets) of technology are bound up in it. As we are intricately bound up in the discourses of security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism, we can end up contributing to the power of these concepts, even if we do so unwittingly or unwillingly.

Recalling that desire operates as an engine of imperialism through the fundamental mode of provoking desire for one's own repression, the conceptual framework of technologies allows for an exploration of some of the mechanisms through which imperialist desire is maintained and serviced. These technologies are the devices through which imperialism fashions itself as both new and as lamentably necessary, both for the subject-citizens of empire and for those who are subjugated-saved by it. Here again, the epistemology of the Cold War plays a key role in reframing war from a defensive act to a series of preemptive (and endless) acts. The intensification of neoliberalism and nuclear arsenals of the Reagan era wielded the specter of the evil empire as existential threat, whereas George W. Bush called the war on terror a fight against the axis of evil.⁸⁵ While the branding of the enemy as evil is certainly not new to war-making, the construction of the evil enemy as an ever-present threat to citizens of the U.S. on their own turf is a distinguishing feature of the Cold War epistemological stance on war and militarism. Nuclear proliferation at the height of the Cold War created the image of an ever-present threat, a condition that facilitated the orientation toward national security as the dominant paradigm, both domestically and internationally. Through the ruse of imminent foreign threat, the Cold War also concealed the social impact of neoliberal economic policies, particularly well illustrated in the shifting of public resources from social services to the defense industry. Under the guise of privatization, personal responsibility, and national security, the defense industry replaced people as the recipients of social welfare. Perhaps the best example of this shift domestically is the expansion of the prison-industrial complex, which criminalized mostly impoverished (and predominantly African American) communities through the war on drugs.⁸⁶

Coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism as a dominant economic policy, the proliferation of metaphorical wars since the 1970s—Nixon's war on crime and Reagan's war on drugs and war on terrorism, both of which have been extended into the contemporary (Bush and Obama) wars on drugs, terror, and immigration—demonstrate less about the purported subjects of these wars (crime, drugs, terror, and immigration) and more about the salience of war as a metaphor. The idea of constant and pervasive threat is cultivated, cementing security as a critical technology of imperialism. Desert romances demonstrate the way

citizen-subjects of an empire (represented by the white heroine) come to desire security through a desire for the sheikh-hero, who allies his country with the U.S. war on terror by adopting the logic of securitization.⁸⁷

If the Cold War epistemological construction of the enemy as a pervasive and imminent threat is critical, so too is the Manichaeic notion of the threat as evil, insofar as both notions contribute to the construction of freedom as a technology of contemporary imperialism. Christian religious discourse offers a particularly useful way of understanding the technology of freedom. Just as missionary work was shaped by, and helped shape, colonial projects, contemporary Christian evangelical discourses about the Middle East illustrate a neo-imperialist stance crafted through the rubric of saving or liberating the region. In these narratives, the war on terror takes on a moral front, as in an article for *Christianity Today*, titled “The Moral Home Front,” which argues that failing to implement the Federal Marriage Amendment (to define marriage as strictly monogamous and heterosexual) is “like handing moral weapons of mass destruction to those who use America’s decadence to recruit more snipers and hijackers and suicide bombers.”⁸⁸ The logic here clearly extends the war on terror to the “home front,” essentially implying that (sexual) freedom must be curtailed to win the war on terror. At the same time, the perception of Islam as backward and oppressive, proven through both sexual hyperconservatism and depravity, functions to cast U.S. intervention as a liberating mission. An intriguing set of alliances is suggested here among Christian evangelicals and those with whom the evangelicals politically align, despite sometimes radically different goals or worldviews. One example is Christian Zionism, which has staunchly backed the state of Israel since the nation’s founding, because of a belief in biblical prophecy rather than through the support of Jewish people. Another example is the evangelical support of South Sudan. Evangelicals cast their support according to a narrative that identifies South Sudan as Christian and understands the conflict in religious terms; this narrative ironically utilizes a human rights (secular) framework to advance a larger argument about the persecution of Christians by Muslims, an argument that draws on the troubling binary of good Christians and bad Muslims.⁸⁹

Taken to their logical conclusion, these arguments clearly call for saving (i.e., freeing) the territory of the Middle East from the depraved

and evil Muslims who inhabit it. In other words, this sort of evangelism argues for liberating Arabiastan from Arabiastanis themselves, and delivering it to Christian Western civilization. Analyzing this movement through the lens of the popular *Left Behind* series of novels depicting the rapture, Melani McAlister notes that “*Left Behind* constitutes a literature well fitted for a new era in which the United States defines itself as a frankly imperialist power engaged in a long-term battle for control of the Middle East.”⁹⁰ The importance of the Middle East in these narratives goes back to nineteenth-century fascinations with the Holy Land but includes a contemporary, imperialist spin. Expanding on the “city upon a hill” narrative, so central to early configurations of U.S. exceptionalism, contemporary Christianity figures the geography of the Middle East to be under the custodianship of the United States. Further, particularly in the Christian evangelical rhetoric about Revelations and the rapture, contemporary sociopolitical events—for example, modern-day warfare, new technologies utilized in the war on terror, and climate change—are read as manifestations of biblical prophecy rather than the catastrophic (and changeable) results of human activity. Here Arabiastan becomes subject to, and an object of, the imperialist technology of freedom, which particularly manifests itself in desert romances through the civilizing of both the sheikh-hero and his Arabiastani country. Significantly, both are commonly civilized through the rubric of women’s liberation, echoing the salience of gender equality as a key technology of the actual war on terror. Through this conversion, cast as a project of delivering freedom, Arabiastan is cleansed of its backward, traditional ways, even while the good sheikh learns how to sanitize and capitalize on those customs and traditions considered quaint or colorful.

The process of civilizing the sheikh-hero overlaps with the technology of liberal multiculturalism, a technology that shapes and creates the good sheikh as an exceptional ally to U.S.-Anglo imperialist powers. The sheikh’s dependence on benign U.S.-Anglo cooperation echoes the casting of the U.S. by neoconservatives and liberals alike as the only power capable of bringing democracy to the Middle East. In this sense, this image coincides with two suppositions. The first is the historically based national myth of the U.S. as exceptional (i.e., the “city upon a hill,” a narrative that clearly embeds the notion of exceptionality with Christianity from the beginning). The second is the contemporary state-of-

exception argument deployed to justify increased surveillance regimes and the eroding of civil liberties.⁹¹ As Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller argue: “Without an understanding of the continuity of American exceptionalism, complexly constituted of religious, economic, cultural, political, and racial elements beginning with Puritan theocracy and continuing with the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, for instance, we cannot make sense of the conviction shared by many contemporary politicians and citizens alike that the United States has been and will always remain the provider and protector of world freedom.”⁹²

The myth of exceptionalism also proves itself remarkably malleable, operating, for instance, in recent years through various permutations of U.S. sexual exceptionalism.⁹³ While Jasbir Puar has investigated this phenomenon in relation to the war on terror generally, and more specifically in relation to Abu Ghraib, an example especially well suited for the analysis of desert romances comes in the film *Sex and the City 2*, itself a version of a desert romance.⁹⁴ Though the film centers around the antics that the famously sexually liberated foursome get into while visiting Abu Dhabi in the notoriously sexually repressive “new Middle East,” the opening scene exudes sexual liberalism par excellence—the gay wedding of close friends of the foursome.⁹⁵ In a superb example of what Puar calls homonationalism, the scene economically sets up the key tension around which the film is organized—the exceptional sexual liberalism of the U.S. in contrast to the presumed sexual repression of the Middle East.⁹⁶ Desert romances are most successful when they clearly align themselves with the unique universalism of the U.S. through the exceptionally enlightened good sheikh.

The three technologies of security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism demonstrate that desire is just as important as, if not more important than, fear in the architecture of the war on terror. The novels’ resolution with heteronormative marriage demonstrates an organization of desire that is echoed at the social level by the common trope of the sheikh who seeks to work with U.S.-Anglo powers (despite the threats from terrorists in his own country who don’t agree with his progressive stance) to bring his country into the modern era.⁹⁷ The obligatory HEA (happily ever after) ending—almost always heterosexual marriage—is widely touted as the key element that makes a romance novel success-

ful.⁹⁸ Therefore, the resolution of marriage operates as one of the primary technologies for organizing (i.e., containing) desire and orienting it toward hegemonic formations. Though the HEA ending is not a feature unique to desert romances, this subgenre does uniquely illustrate how the larger social field of investment in the war on terror is permeated by these kinds of microinvestments. That is, the organization of desire, illuminated in the narratives of desert romances and existing in myriad cultural formations, propels the war on terror (itself a particular manifestation of contemporary U.S. imperialism) in significant ways. The containment or colonization of desire creates a framework where security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism can operate as technologies of imperialism.

Mapping Desire

The truth is that sexuality is everywhere: the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; the way the bourgeoisie fucks the proletariat; and so on. . . . Flags, nations, armies, banks get a lot of people aroused.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (p. 293)

The primary aim in mapping desire is not to diagnose it or to invent new imperialist pathologies. Rather, as indicated by the focus on technologies, the aim is to figure something out about how desire functions and to map its relationship to other key aspects of imperial power. If the mechanisms of contemporary benevolent imperialism—the technologies of security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism—are powered by desire, then these technologies (and, by extension, the process of imperialism itself) gain a constant reservoir of justification through the myth of exceptionalism. To recount, the logic goes something like this: As a uniquely multicultural and democratic nation, the empire is obliged to bring freedom to other countries. When backward elements in these countries resist liberation delivered through neoliberal modernization, precautionary state-of-exception measures are required to ensure the security of the empire and its citizen-subjects. In this formulation, the myth of exceptionalism operates according to a paranoid logic. In other

words, embedded in the myth are both the potential for grandiosity (in order to truly believe in one's own exceptionality) and the concomitant fear of persecution (presumably by those who are jealous of or desire the exceptional status).⁹⁹

It might be tempting to understand the U.S. as having slid into a state of paranoid power as a result of a radical shift stimulated by the events of September 11, 2001. Hayden White contributes to such a reading when he claims that “the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 had the effect of collapsing a particularly triumphalist version of American history.”¹⁰⁰ Conversely, Anne McClintock's definition of paranoia as related to empire encourages us to see the continuities across historical constructions of the U.S. empire, rather than understanding 9/11 as a radical break: “I conceive of paranoia as *an inherent contradiction with respect to power*: a double-sided phantasm that oscillates precariously between deliriums of grandeur and nightmares of perpetual threat, a deep and dangerous doubleness with respect to power that is held in unstable tension, but which, if suddenly destabilized (as after 9/11), can produce pyrotechnic displays of violence.”¹⁰¹ Here, she paints a picture of an imperial formation (in the case of the U.S., as exceptional state) that is always inherently unstable and that is held together in many ways by the very duality that causes a suturing tension—the appearance of stability despite its actual precariousness. McClintock leads us away from seeing 9/11 as a radical break while she suggests how 9/11 could have stimulated particularly violent and repressive manifestations of a U.S. empire.

The paradigm of paranoia, in particular, enables a further theorization of the structure of contemporary U.S. imperialism—a theory that connects imperialism to the question of desire. Though McClintock herself does not mention the work of Deleuze and Guattari, her use of paranoia invokes their theories of hegemony.¹⁰² In their schema, paranoia is the “molar” mode of hegemony, a mode that is exemplified in empire (as opposed to a schizophrenic, “molecular” mode, manifested in forms of resistance and potentialities that break free of gridded hegemonic power). In other words, paranoia (the molar mode) represents a hegemonic strategy of organizing, or stratifying, revolutionary energies. Molarization seeks to organize elements toward a coherent whole, while molecularization is attendant to fluidity, flux, and instability. Paul

Elliott describes molarity as “an organising force [that] brings things and people together; it homogenises variety and flattens difference,” while he describes the molecular self as “exist[ing] beyond and behind simple structures” and as “evanescent but no less important.”¹⁰³ Imperialism can be described as paranoid insofar as it relies on a fundamental binary opposition—its own grandiose benevolence and simultaneous fear of existential threat—to organize and consolidate power. As Brian Massumi writes in his *User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, “molarization is as paranoid as it is imperialist.”¹⁰⁴ According to this paradigm, one can understand the types of activities carried out by the United States since 9/11—not just literal military violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Pakistan, but also especially the heightened state of surveillance and biopolitical disciplining through the related networks of immigration detention centers, the prison-industrial complex, military prisons, special registration, and other forms of civil liberty encroachment—as a redoubling of efforts to consolidate, or molarize, biopolitical energies. In other words, the contemporary iteration of U.S. imperialism can be understood as paranoid precisely because of its intensive focus on molarization—because of its efforts to make itself appear whole.

Two key ideas in Deleuze and Guattari’s work undergird this assertion. First, desire is not privatized—relegated to the individual or psychic domain as something separate from the functioning of larger social structures: “The most general principle of schizoanalysis is that desire is always constitutive of a social field. In any case desire belongs to the infrastructure, not to ideology.”¹⁰⁵ As an integral part of the “infrastructure,” desire plays a material role in the construction of the social field. In this sense, desert romances serve as a rich resource for investigation. Insofar as they foreground desire as the main concern of the narrative, they focus on the kinds of microinvestments that animate molarizing technologies of imperialism and they orient us toward exploring collective investments in the war on terror. This is not to say that the novels are proof of an underlying desire; they are rather the route toward exploring often-hidden elements of imperialism. Instead of seeing desire as enclosed within the individual or family unit (i.e., colonized by Oedipus, particularly in the classic psychoanalytic paradigm), Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to explore how it shapes social production.¹⁰⁶ This conceptualization allows me to move away from the

much-maligned earlier feminist question about whether romance novels are oppressive (by reinforcing patriarchal norms and values), since this question is focused in the wrong direction—toward the imposition of structural power on a subset of individuals. From the perspective of schizoanalysis, this question misses the point, because it focuses on the impact or outcome of reading the novels rather than exploring how desire functions in them.¹⁰⁷ The latter orientation uses the novels as rich materials for investigating how desire functions on a social or collective level, rather than on a select group of individual readers. More specifically, the schizoanalytic approach notes how the novels repress, rather than oppress, desire, but not repress in a purely psychoanalytic sense.¹⁰⁸ Desert romances offer an exemplary model of how desire can come to be organized—the functional repressing of revolutionary desire and the psychic investment in a repressive (paranoid) social system.¹⁰⁹ Presumably because of the potential for “revolution” to be reterritorialized (think: “the revolution will not be televised,” which has been appropriated in countless consumerist ways), Deleuze and Guattari shift from the notion of revolutionary desire, introduced in *Anti-Oedipus*, to that of “lines of flight.”¹¹⁰ The latter term expresses the potential that could be realized when desire is unbound—when it can escape the striating, organizing powers of signifying and postsignifying (capitalist) regimes like the paranoid U.S. empire. As one example of this simultaneously social and psychic repression, desert romances help us explore the imperialist molarization of desire—a process that also occurs in myriad other situations.

Following the focus on the functionality of desire rather than its outcomes, a second key concern of Deleuze and Guattari is to ask how people come to desire their own repression, or how they can be oriented to desire hegemony.¹¹¹ Though the answers to this question are multiple, one of the main culprits, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is deterritorialization, which can operate in many guises—from literally divesting people of their territory to figuratively divesting a concept of its meaning. In fact, in its absolute form, deterritorialization can free up lines of flight—it can enable molecular forms of escape from the imperialist-hegemonic molarization of power. Perhaps because of its liberatory potential, deterritorialization is also the process most appropriated by hegemonic capitalist formations.¹¹²

The war on terror is a brilliant example of the appropriation of de-territorialization, particularly because the war on terror operates in multiple modes of deterritorialization simultaneously. First, it deterritorializes war, where war is understood to be direct military combat against a clearly defined enemy. In the war on terror, the enemy—terrorists everywhere—is vaguely defined and constantly shifting; the ambiguous nature of the definition enables preemptive strikes—that is, the illusion of defending the nation against a constantly imminent attack. Warfare itself is quite literally deterritorialized for the imperialist power through military tactics like drone strikes (which have increased tremendously under the Obama administration, killing many civilians in two countries—Yemen and Pakistan—with which the U.S. is officially allied, much less officially at war). Drone attacks themselves are a particularly alarming evolution of the main mode of U.S. military conflict throughout the past few decades: proxy wars, which signal a clear connection between the current context and the Cold War era.¹¹³

Closely linked to the form of military action enacted under the war-on-terror rubric is the way the U.S. justifies military intervention. As an aspect of the exceptional-state narrative (in the form of what Melani McAlister has called “benevolent supremacy”), U.S. imperialism deterritorializes colonialism by presenting itself as a liberty-loving nation that was born out of a struggle against the British (colonial) fatherland and which therefore only enacts military intervention for humanitarian reasons—for example, to free states from oppressive dictators, to bring democracy, and to liberate women.¹¹⁴ Speaking about popular historical romances written at the turn of the nineteenth century, Amy Kaplan notes that “the novels enacted the U.S. fantasy of global conquest without colonial annexation, what Albert Memmi called the ultimate imperial desire for a colony rid of the colonized.”¹¹⁵ A similar sort of fantasy pervades contemporary desert romances through the figure of the progressive-minded sheikh who seeks U.S.-Anglo support to bring his country in line with the global economy (i.e., the new world order). Recalling Deleuze and Guattari’s statement that “it is always on the most deterritorialized element that reterritorialization takes place,” one can understand the U.S. to be reterritorializing settler colonialism in a vast, scattered, hegemonic network of U.S. military bases, which do effectively function as hundreds of colonies rid of the colonized.¹¹⁶

Deterritorialization in the war on terror also takes place on less physical, if not less material, terrains—at the level of signification and subjectification.¹¹⁷ Regarding signification, a double, negative deterritorialization results from the use of the word *terror*. First, though it gains its force from the reference to a specific, violent attack on the U.S. or its citizens, the term immediately slides into the signifier *terrorism*, which quickly loses contact with any concrete meaning and becomes an empty, floating signifier porous enough to capture any number of activities deemed threatening by the imperialist state.¹¹⁸ Second, there is a slide from the now slippery term *terrorism* to the even more problematically abstract term *terror*. In this way, the so-called war on terror wages war on everything and nothing at once, with a signifier, *terror*, that is capable of incorporating virtually anything or anyone who may potentially someday provoke fear, with all definitions of these latter terms held under lock and key by the empire itself. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this use of language as a “signifying regime.”¹¹⁹ They describe it as a key mode of the state, which operates by overcoding (a word that is roughly equivalent to reterritorialization). Here, the state overcodes and reterritorializes the war on terror by giving it institutional life (through the new structure of the Department of Homeland Security); through the curtailment of civil liberties in the Patriot Act; and through a network of military prisons (Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram). The prisons simultaneously give the impression that there are real terrorist enemies (despite the fact that the vast majority of prisoners are held without charge) and function to constantly symbolize the threat of U.S. terrorist opposition anew.

These discursive constructions of terror and terrorism, in turn, point to the way the war on terror deterritorializes on subjectivity itself. Operating also in the mode of a postsignifying regime, whereby the function of language is subjectification, the war on terror creates a new category of people—terrorists—only a small percentage of whom have committed or planned to commit violent action impacting civilians to directly oppose a state power.¹²⁰ The vast majority of people in this new category share the crime of having been in the wrong place at the wrong time while being Muslim.¹²¹

Though these deterritorializing techniques may not seem to be driven by desire, they nevertheless demonstrate how desire becomes trapped or

organized into a social infrastructure permeated by the war on terror. The deterritorializing energies of the war on terror are channeled into the “great danger of Fear,” which is animated by desire.¹²² Desire is the infrastructure—not a by-product or a separate entity, say Deleuze and Guattari: “Our security, the great molar organization that sustains us, the arborescences we cling to, the binary machines that give us well-defined status, the resonances we enter into, the system of overcoding that dominates us—we desire all that.”¹²³ Sounds a bit like a romance novel. Indeed, at the level of desire, desert romances can be likened to U.S. military bases in terms of their ability to reterritorialize on the impulse toward colonialism.¹²⁴

If U.S. military bases reterritorialize colonialism by instituting a scattered territorial occupation framed in terms of cooperation rather than conquest, desert romances reterritorialize the (Oedipal) colonization of desire by channeling readers’ desires (one book at a time) toward heteronormative coupling—the key unit of state biopower. Each book connects to an intricate gridding of desire, all the while claiming a liberatory (feminist) goal of sexual liberation.¹²⁵ The romances, and especially the disavowal that they bear no relation to the war on terror, reinscribe the notion of the bourgeoisie, heterosexual family unit as abstract from, or transcendent of, the social field in which it is produced. Further, a careful reading of desert romances within the context of the romance industry reveals key negative deterritorializing and reterritorializing processes of the war on terror. A mapping of the novels’ libidinal investments can simultaneously reveal signature aspects of the social infrastructure as permeated by the war on terror. Though they rely heavily on the metaphor of the oasis, portraying heteronormative marriage as the great shelter and bulwark against a sea (or desert) of loneliness, danger, and fear, desert romances are not inured from the impact of the social context in which they are written. When it comes to the potency of the war on terror and its various negative deterritorializations, desert romances certainly do not escape “overcoding by the signifier, irradiation in all directions, unlocalized omnipresence.”¹²⁶ Though they are fantasy stories and therefore not meant to be real representations of Arabiastan, the structure of fantasy is, in fact, precisely what frees them to more honestly articulate the way that desire functions to uphold the architecture of the war on terror.

Unknown Knowns

At the beginning of the Iraq war, in the lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, then secretary of state Donald Rumsfeld sought to justify military action by describing, in a mix of corporate and bureaucratic speech, the danger of unknown threats: “There are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don’t know. But there are also unknown unknowns. These are things we don’t know we don’t know.”¹²⁷ Presumably, it is the last category of (un)knowledge that poses the most threat and plays most forcefully on the fears of the U.S. public, which seemed to experience 9/11 as a previous “unknown unknown” that materialized as a gory, nightmarish reality. The invocation of such an “unknown unknown,” even if vaguely or abstractly referenced (after all, we were now engaged in a war on terror, and what is terrifying if not an unknown unknown that doesn’t need a direct referent?), could and did justify military aggression against a country that played no role in 9/11.¹²⁸ As Slavoj Žižek points out, however, in Rumsfeld’s “amateur philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown,” he forgot to add the “crucial fourth term [of] ‘unknown knowns,’ things we don’t know that we know.”¹²⁹ Since fantasy is the prime vehicle for not knowing what one knows, desert romances can also provide a means of exploring the “unknown knowns” of popular U.S. consciousness—the “disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves, but which nonetheless determine our acts and feelings.”¹³⁰ Rather than psychoanalyzing a nation-state (the U.S.), this book investigates the unconscious collective psychic investments that animate the war on terror. Recalling that disavowal can be defined as “an intellectual acceptance of what is repressed, even as the repression is maintained,” contemporary desert romances enable a “looking awry” at the unknown knowns that shape the structure of the war on terror to shortcut intellectual acceptance and to investigate the workings of desire in animating the war on terror.¹³¹ If the desire for security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism represents the intellectual acceptance of subjects’ attachments to the war on terror, what remains repressed is the way these technologies of security, freedom, and liberal multiculturalism actually orient subject-citizens and allied

subjects of empire alike toward desiring their own repression and therefore toward the perpetuation of the war on terror.

Irradiated by Desire

As indicated in the epigraph to this introduction, sheikh-heroes embody the power of radiation. They radiate sexual energy and raw, masculine power in a way that both thrills and terrifies heroines; they therefore economically communicate how fear can operate as a manifestation of desire. Perhaps more importantly, though, radiation serves as a useful metaphor for desire as a permeating, driving force of the war on terror. If the sheikh-hero is defined by radiation, the potential danger of this force is mitigated both by the heroine's ability to tame him and his ultimate emergence as a good sheikh-hero, who seeks to abolish or secure weapons of mass destruction. In those novels that feature a villain counterpart to the sheikh-hero, the villain acts as the hero's evil counterpart since the villain is almost always involved in uranium-enriching activities or in seeking nuclear arms in order to seize power from the sheikh and oppose U.S.-Anglo global superpowers.

Beyond mimicking common narratives about rogue Middle Eastern states (e.g., Iraq and Iran), the radiation metaphor speaks to several aspects of the psychic meanings of desert romances simultaneously. First, the metaphor gives a concrete image to the abstract notion of terror invoked by Rumsfeld's "unknown unknowns." This more literal association, in turn, slides into the realm of unknown knowns. Writing about Chernobyl, Žižek explains that it is "precisely [the] indifference to its mode of symbolization that locates the radiation in the dimension of the real. No matter what we say about it, it continues to expand, to reduce us to the role of impotent witnesses."¹³² Existing powerfully in the realm of the real (the unknown known), in other words, radiation remains nevertheless unknown because of its unrepresentability. In this way, radiation is also tied metaphorically to globalization, which perhaps explains radiation's common linking to terrorism in desert romances as the sinister consequence of the sheikh-hero's efforts to globalize. Globalization is consistently represented as an inevitably expanding process characterized by unprecedented fluidities. The optimism of this narrative, however, doesn't allow for the anxieties and horrific realities that the

narrative necessarily provokes and that are representationally displaced onto the threat of terrorism, where radiation is a potent weapon in the hands of evil forces.

Radiation also provides a literal and integrative example of the realities of neoliberal globalization, including the primacy of militarism in waging neoliberal imperialism. The effects of radiation are apparent in myriad aftermaths of war and disaster. The recent example of the failed nuclear reactors in Fukushima, Japan, further demonstrates the utility of the metaphor. Insofar as the meltdown was provoked by a natural disaster, the Japanese disaster demonstrates the imbrication of climate change with the politics of violence and war.

The narratives around recent catastrophic environmental events, like Hurricane Katrina; the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile; and the oceanic earthquakes that wreaked havoc in both Aceh, Indonesia, and Thailand in 2004 and in Japan in 2011 emphasized the events' impact as natural disasters and focused on issues of social preparedness and relief efforts for such disasters. However, the realities underlying these events point to a more complex landscape of interrelationships between climate change, resource scarcity, and violence, conflict, and militarization. In short, events that on the surface seem like natural disasters are also embedded in narratives of national security and are therefore inextricably linked to contemporary formations of imperialism and hegemony. Christian Parenti describes this phenomenon as a "catastrophic convergence" of "poverty, violence, and climate change," which is embedded in the convergence of global neoliberal economic restructuring with the lingering framework of Cold War militarism and the contemporary effects of global warming.¹³³ The actual radiation that emanated from the failed Fukushima nuclear plant, therefore, serves simultaneously as a powerful metaphor for the social invisibility of the "catastrophic convergence" underlying contemporary natural disasters and resource conflicts. While military intervention in the Middle East is sometimes framed in terms of oil as the key resource at the root of the conflict, shifting to the metaphor of radiation helps to illustrate a more complex landscape of imperialist power.

Radiation is silent, intangible, and unrepresentable at the same time that it is uncontainable; it permeates all kinds of material realities, both literal-physical and mental-social. Its impacts can be difficult to trace and

are slow to appear. Radiation would seem to affect all people equally, then, regardless of social position, yet the realities of its devastation are socially stratified. Whether the victims of radiation are disenfranchised communities located next to sites of environmental waste, survivors of war dealing with the remnants of chemical warfare, soldiers negotiating the aftermath of contact with depleted uranium, or indigenous peoples grappling with nuclear reactors situated on their land, the devastation of radiation is wrought on those with the least political power. In this respect, radiation reflects the structure of hegemony—the ways power can operate in seemingly invisible, unsuspecting ways while simultaneously having powerful material effects. As the quotes that begin this introduction point out, radiation serves as a potent metaphor in desert romances for good reason; it is thrillingly and terrifyingly tangible and intangible at the same time. In its material and invisible forms, radiation cuts both ways.

Radiation therefore operates as a framing metaphor for how desire animates contemporary technologies of U.S. imperialism. The metaphor is threaded throughout the chapters, each of which addresses a technology of imperialism in relation to the war on terror. In chapter 1, the radiation metaphor takes the form of weapons of mass destruction since they are a clear example of the threat to which the technology of security responds. Investigating the strategies that romance authors use to clearly distance the sheikh-hero from the figure of the terrorist simultaneously reveals the construction of the sheikh-hero as an exceptional leader allied with U.S.-Anglo powers. The authors therefore demonstrate the good-sheikh subjectivity to be a crucially under-theorized one in contemporary investigations of Arabiastani masculinities.

Chapter 2 begins where chapter 1 leaves off, with a consideration of the key word *freedom*. While discourses of terrorism tend to obfuscate any real engagement with the notion of freedom, relegating it to the realm of neoliberal market freedoms, desert romances activate the concept through fantasies of feminist liberation focused on saving the other. The radiation metaphor here takes the form of enriching uranium since the chapter investigates how freedom operates as a primary technology of contemporary imperialism. In other words, at stake here is the question of the politics of uranium enrichment—who has the freedom to enrich uranium, given the process's relationship both to alternative forms of energy and to nuclear weaponry.

The trope of the desert is particularly ripe for exploring these questions. First, the desert operates symbolically as a space in which the heroine loses herself to find herself.¹³⁴ The desert therefore enables a kind of exploration that is identified with feminism, where feminism is understood simply as the freedom to choose the life one desires. This individualist notion of freedom further intersects with consumerist ideas of freedom, exemplified by the lavish settings in which the heroines find themselves. Because the usually white heroines are lauded for their strength and independence and, unlike Arab women, can therefore help the sheikh modernize his country, desert romances allow for an exploration of a contemporary iteration of hegemony on the megalomaniacal side of paranoia: the urge to liberate Arabiastani women by reforming their patriarchal societies, one sheikh at a time.

Chapter 3 employs the x-ray mode of the radiation metaphor to explore how race and, in particular, the racialization of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 operate as a structuring reality in the romance novels precisely because racialization cannot be named or acknowledged. Because race is itself a social fantasy that operates as a social reality, desert romances serve as apropos materials for investigating the unspoken material consequences of race. Since the racialization of actual Arabs and Muslims in western Europe and the U.S. has increased following 9/11 (in conjunction with the rise in popularity of desert romances), authors have had to become more savvy about how they code the sheikh-hero's exoticism without risking his overt racialization. An investigation of these codes reveals the way that ethnicity, religion, and cultural dress operate as key elements around which the racialization of Arabs and Muslims spins. The sheikh-hero is made palatable by ethnicizing him, a move that is based on the liberal multiculturalist notion of tolerance toward difference, while anesthetizing overt raciality. Utilizing "postrace" and "color-blind" logic, the technology of liberal multiculturalism is another mechanism through which the exceptionalist logic of benevolent empire can be communicated. The sheikh-hero serves as an exemplary vehicle through which to deliver the imperialist gift of freedom.¹³⁵

If chapters 1 through 3 investigate particular mechanisms for desiring one's own repression, chapter 4 takes up the overarching narrative of the desire for wholeness that plays out in romance novels. The main idea here is perhaps best exemplified by Omar Sharif (a major sex symbol in

the world of desert romances) and his assertion that “to make a woman happy in bed, you’ve got to be half man and half woman.”¹³⁶ Indeed, the ideal alpha-male sheikh-hero exudes hypermasculinity externally while revealing a soft, sensitive side only to the heroine. He therefore serves as the perfect figure through which to explore the underlying architecture of one’s own desire for repression, which is the desire for wholeness. While the idea of wholeness pervades the larger genre of romance novels, desert romances in particular demonstrate how the desire for wholeness resonates at both the individual level of subjectivity and at the national level of imperialist state formation. Employing the metaphor of radiation in terms of the structural instability of radioactive materials, chapter 4 uses the idea of half-life to demonstrate the importance of complementary binaries in the narrative desire for wholeness. The chapter argues that the romantic narrative of wholeness serves to shore up imperialist power by eliding its actual instabilities.

The imperialist love story of the war on terror does not have a happy ending—neither for the subjects of imperial power nor for its targets—despite the discursive energy expended on resolving the project of benevolent imperialism into a happy ending, or as corporate-bureaucratic speech might have it, a win-win situation. The lack of a happy ending, though, is nothing to lament. Reading the story with this realization can instead be an impetus for seeking an end to the war on terror, for freeing up the desires bounded by contemporary technologies of imperialism, and for spinning them toward truly liberatory aims.