This article examines the proceedings of the seminar and the applied approach to teaching the popular romance in three distinct ways. First, it documents and reflects on the planning, structuring, and delivery of the module. Secondly, it considers the students' development and progress and their response to the pedagogical measures. Lastly, it argues popular romance as a topic for academic study can appeal to both BA and teaching degree university students who study English in a German academic setting.

Popular genres in general (such as crime or detective, but also horror fiction—seminars on which generate a lot of student interest and participation in my experience) have a strong appeal as a subject, presumably since they connect directly to many students' reading preferences and interests. Of course, there is also a case to be made for the idea that some of my students started to express during classes: that a seminar on popular culture initially often gives rise to the (very quickly corrected) notion that this topic would contain "less difficult and complex" texts to analyse, not involve much abstract theory, or require much personal effort. But this did not deter the participants from engaging in the texts and assignments. Thus, student interest can definitely be generated, even among those who picked popular literature as a topic because they assumed it would just be "easy." Moreover, dealing with popular genres can motivate students by demonstrating that academic approaches are more than dry, abstract theories, but can and should inspire critical reflection on their own lives, how they conceive of the world, their own habits, contexts and reading practices. Finally, with regard to the academic setting, it will be shown that such a module can very well be integrated into courses which focus on the study of literature and culture in general, and can enliven academic discussion by shedding light onto genres which are underrepresented even in the study of popular culture.

The students were permitted to choose the elective class after having acquired knowledge of basic approaches to both literary and cultural "texts," leaving me with the task of recapitulating that knowledge and encouraging them to apply it to the study of popular romance novels and their structures. This seminar was designed to provide insight into the workings of specific popular romance subgenres, as well as to offer an overview of criticism levelled against the genre in general, and to enhance student's abilities to analyse a popular cultural environment of production and consumption.

The seminar "Reading the Popular Romance" was thus one of a number of similarly structured elective seminars on various topics offered in the respective semester. Which of these seminars the students attended was up to their preference in topic and depended on how they managed their personal study schedule. For them, the module offered the chance to actively incorporate and apply the knowledge they gained in introductory and advanced seminars, which focus mainly on theoretical approaches and exemplary case studies. Thus, working within the constraints of one genre and on selected texts with given literary and cultural studies approaches would help them to think critically and perform academic analyses both orally and in written form. In pursuit of their degree, the Proseminar is intended to be the next step in becoming proficient at producing coherent (close) readings and analyses of a text, followed by incorporating the analyses into a sound argumentative structure—first with the lecturer in class and then with a more narrow focus in their end-of-term-papers. Acquiring academic skills at this level also includes honing research abilities and being able to conform to the desired formalities both when preparing presentations and the end-of-term-paper, especially with regard to the bibliographical details. In order to facilitate this learning, I used a mixture of teaching approaches. Learning objective oriented measures, such as recaps on central approaches and summaries of the results of analyses, were central in relaying the necessary information to the students (Johansen 11-13). In addition, some elements of activity-oriented teaching (Johansen 89-91) were incorporated to enliven the teaching style and encourage student participation as well as increase interest. The most important measures in this respect were group work/workshopping with a partner (Johansen 73) and interactive class discussions which were partly designed to help students with their soft skills, developing the capacity to work in a team and dealing with possibly conflicting opinions of others in an academically appropriate manner. However, these approaches were subject to revision throughout the duration of the seminar, since "no single strategy works for every teacher in every situation" (Daniel 91). The pedagogical aims in the first stages of planning and structuring the seminar were quite basic, since it is difficult to judge the exact possibilities of a class without getting to know the students and the dynamics among them first. The seminar structure was in itself very conducive to discussions and group work, as it let students develop trains of thought and arguments on their own, share them in a group of their peers, and then present them to other groups and the lecturer. Developing skills at both accepting but also formulating constructive criticism and delivering it to a fellow student were likewise part of the aims for this module. The "point of departure" for the students also varied, with some having read popular...
romances before, but not the specific subgenres we were to touch upon, while others’ experience of the genre was mostly limited to ideas from Hollywood cinema. Thus, bringing everyone onto a level that the class could start from was of utmost importance in the first weeks.

Concerning linguistic abilities, the seminar provides a stage for the students to practice speaking English freely in front of an audience (especially important for those doing a teaching degree) and bringing them closer to complete fluency in the English language. By the time they attended the Proseminar, the students also had undergone two language training courses with the university’s language department, in addition to at least five years of English in school. Therefore, the students’ language capabilities allowed for the seminar on popular romance to be held entirely in English. At times, though, especially in group discussions, it became apparent that their passive language skills and vocabulary were more developed than their active ones. Most prevalent were problems with grammar and tenses in spoken English. As a result, the class was comprised of a medium-level group of readers, speakers and writers, with exceptions on both ends of the spectrum. Some of the students also intended to go abroad at the end of their second year in order to perfect their language skills.

Since the class was offered as part of the English Literary and Cultural Studies elective seminar for second to fourth year BA and teaching degree students, the syllabus material had to be limited to primary literature by British authors. Thanks to the work I had done in my Magister thesis, I was deemed capable of choosing the primary and secondary texts myself, running them by my supervisor for final approval. However, a US-American angle was included by providing an overview of the romance genre and its place in popular culture, as well as in the publishing industry and the importance of marketing and producing the book as an “object” in the UK and in the US. The idea of analysing the popular romance novel in its book form as an object was motivated by my background in the analysis of book markets and book production, acquired as a result of research conducted for a degree course called “Study of the Book” (Buchwissenschaften), also taught at FAU.

During the fourteen-week semester, with one ninety-minute unit per week at my disposal, the focus was on three primary texts which were analysed in depth, namely Georgette Heyer’s Bath Tangle (1955), E.M. Hull’s The Sheik (1919), and a more recent Mills & Boon category romance, Marguerite Kaye’s The Governess and the Sheikh (2011), which falls into both the Regency and desert subgenre. Special emphasis was put firstly on an introduction to the popular romance as a genre, as a mode, and a functioning cultural construct within an economic context. Secondly, we concentrated on the aspects of hierarchical difference presented in the texts, which were supposedly overcome by the end of the novel. One important objective was to foster students’ capacity to work actively on texts with theoretical concepts from postcolonial studies, gender studies, and media/film studies, and also to show them the breadth of possible fields of research to specialize in during their own studies and maybe even for their BA final papers.

Twenty students signed up for the class—nineteen female students and a “minority” of one male—a ratio that already hints at the very gendered perception of the genre, considering that I advertised the class under the heading of “Reading the Popular Romance.” This overall number of students is quite common for seminars, since they are designed for relatively small groups in order to allow for more intense discussion and a teaching style that also focuses on individual students and their performance. That the popular romance genre had not been on students’ radars as a viable area for academic interest emerged in the first session when I conducted a short oral survey of the reasons why they had selected this class and what expectations they had for it. It turned out that a few of the students were actually romance fans while others were either oblivious to the genre beyond the common stereotypes, or reluctant to admit that they had read popular romances before. Consequently, it became another goal of the seminar to show how current common stereotypes mostly still refer back to 1970s/80s feminist criticism of the genre. When I inquired as to why the students had actually chosen this particular class, the majority of them admitted that they had seen the title and had never encountered a seminar that dealt with popular romance before and were actually quite surprised it would be a topic that fourteen weeks could be devoted to in academia.

Of immediate concern to the students were, of course, the assessments. To successfully complete the seminar, they had to perform an in-class presentation which was mandatory in order to be admitted to the final assessment. The latter was in form of an end-of-term paper (10-12 pages, i.e. roughly 4,000 to 5,000 words) on a topic of interest pertaining to one or more appropriate texts and approaches we dealt with in class. With prior discussion and approval of the lecturer, it was also possible to work on a suitable text not discussed in class beforehand. All topics were primarily chosen and worded by the individual students themselves, thereby making them familiar with the thought processes that go into putting together and verbalizing a thesis on a specific topic as well as researching and describing it in a limited number of words. A further requirement was the weekly reading of required texts designated as essential for each session. In preparation for the assessment, individual meetings were offered and one week’s teaching unit focused entirely on the academic skills and research abilities needed to complete the task successfully. In the last session of the semester, the students were required to present their assessment topic of choice to the whole class and to elaborate on their approach to the assessment, getting feedback and constructive advice from both their colleagues and the lecturer.

Structurally, the lessons were divided up into a presentation (which was a collaborative effort of several students), a discussion about the required reading (with the lecturer adding information from various other texts), and finally the application of the approaches and ideas we had talked about to the primary text(s) in question. I probably should mention that, though I was talking about the “romance,” it was made clear from the outset that the findings of the seminar would only relate to the two specific subgenres we would analyse and sweeping generalizations were to be avoided. The overall structure of the fourteen-week seminar was as follows:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Introductory session</strong>&lt;br&gt;Why analyse popular romance? Introduction to romance in a pop cultural context. Introduction to critical voices concerning the romance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>Basic concepts in dealing with and approaches to romance:</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Romance Defined</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Presentation: Overview: The History of the Romance Genre</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>The framework of popular romance in the US and the UK:</strong>&lt;br&gt;A look at the publishing industry&lt;br&gt;<em>Presentation: Mills &amp; Boon and Marketing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Academic Skills Session</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>Literary analysis &amp; close reading:</strong>&lt;br&gt;<em>Bath Tangle (1955)</em>&lt;br&gt;<em>Presentation: The Regency as historical period</em></td>
</tr>
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Emergence of structures of difference and desire. Psychoanalytical questions included inquiries into oedipal structures and Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacanian psychosemiosis (especially the concept of the mirror stage) in order to illustrate the development of the genre, marketing techniques, gendered and heterosexual discourses in the popular romance. After the introductory session, we started out with the basics: general facts about the popular romance as a genre in terms of definition (Hollows 68-88; Engler 7-12), and in terms of approaches that had been used in order to analyse the romance to date. We then set out to have a look at the cultural framework of producing (publishing industry guidelines, marketing techniques, authors as figures of fame) and consuming the popular romance in a popular cultural context. Here, students were asked to participate and comment based on their own experience (also by making comparisons to other popular genres they knew). Having outlined the basic premises of the publication conventions and possibilities, the students again had a chance to contribute, this time via group activities. They had to select three romances at random out of a substantial number of recent and older ones I brought to class and identify what form of publication (single-title/category or formula) as well as sub-genre they belonged to and what the target audience could be. [End Page 6] judging from the cover, in-book ads, author presentation, and paratextual elements. This exercise drove home the possible distinctions to be made within a certain set of current romance publications. The students responded positively to the activity and made observant remarks about the romances they had chosen and how they thought the elements of marketing were incorporated in order to ensure high customer interest. The discussion soon turned to the question of whether the romance novel covers were actually designed to attract new consumers or whether they were more a “marker” of genre for an already existing readership. All groups had at least one older historical romance cover that featured the stereotypical bodice-ripping male protagonist and the heroine with excessively luxuriant hair. Most students commented that even if they were looking for a novel with a romance plot, the covers would quite possibly deter them from buying the book for fear of the reactions of the cashier and people who might observe them carrying or reading a book with such a cover. A discourse of negation and self-censorship became apparent in the groups of students (“I might actually buy the novel, the blurb sounds good but the cover is just too embarrassing.”). Public acquisition of texts which were openly advertised as having “explicit” sexual content and were aimed at women was obviously taken to signify affiliation of the consumer with the stereotype of the frustrated housewife/woman and thus with discontent about one’s position in life and with regard to relationships in particular. Consequently, even though we had discussed and dispelled this stereotype of the reader, it became obvious that it is so ingrained in cultural imaginations about the popular romance as to become almost unshakeable. Fixing images of excessive heterosexual interaction onto the cover and thus referencing both a female tradition of romance production and female pleasure in the consumption of (romantically motivated) sexual action indicates connections to possibly illicit, private reading practices that could be considered culturally transgressive and maybe even part of a taboo which surrounds female-centric depictions of sexual interaction. Of course, this interaction on the cover is entirely expressed in terms of exaggeration, hyperbole, hyper-femininity and -masculinity, clearly marking the representation as a construct, as “fiction,” thereby containing anxieties about active female desire, projecting the latter into the realm of fictionality. Mixing up these historical romances with Mills & Boon Modern category and single-title romances, like J.D. Robb’s/Nora Roberts’s Naked in Death, made for an interesting discussion, since students thought that the crime and science fiction elements as well as the cover of Robb’s text were much closer to genres usually coded as masculine or connected to male traditions of writing. Throwing authors like P.D. James, who writes crime fiction, into the discussion made some of the students realize that if no full name with indication towards the sex of the author is given on the cover or in the paratexts, the genre and cultural practices associated with it are most often the origin of assumptions about gender identity and writing practice. Especially surprising was also the fact that students very quickly started to pick up on the (sexualized) codes of the cover tradition and its system of signification which had been shortly discussed the week before. This indicated an aptitude with visual signifiers that boded very well for the planned film analysis. Part of assessing in-class participation was having the students give presentations on topics such as the historical development of the genre, marketing techniques, gendered and heterosexual discourses in the popular romance, and the depiction of sexuality and sexual interaction in the novels examined. When it came to literary analysis, we started out by going over the narrative basics and laid the groundwork for understanding the subgenre [End Page 7] specific plot motifs, settings, and the recurring set of stereotypical characters. Analysis was conducted mostly through close reading and was based strongly on Pamela Regis’s eight central plot points (Regis 30-38) as well as George Paizis’s work on characterization in his book Love and the Novels (10-26). Here, the notion of a text operating as a “closed system [that is] both an ideal world and an unreal world” (Paizis 99) as well as issues of power and quality of the characters were examined, establishing the different hierarchies and power relations between various (groups of) characters. Group work at this stage included tasks like describing the (structural) function of select chapters in relation to the whole novel and discussing the importance of analysing them (also with regard to how the chapters would fit into Regis’s eight points of the popular romance). Moreover, it encompassed analysing the narrative situation and devices (on the level of discourse), and figuring out how the different characters are constructed by the text, taking into account different levels of mediation. The Regency romance deals with a set of stereotypical characters (for example the rake, the Byronic hero, and the bluestocking or the spinster), which were introduced in order for the students to be able to judge adherence to and deviation from these roles. Going over constructions of gender and gender difference in Bath Tangle required a short introduction to Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacanian psychosemiosis (especially the concept of the mirror stage) in order to illustrate the emergence of structures of difference and desire. Psychoanalytical questions included inquiries into oedipal structures and
Concerning the second subgenre of choice, the desert romance, we began by determining the specific plot motifs, the set of what are now stereotypical characters, and the aspects of the setting that are specific to the subgenre. Moreover, we established the notion of Orientalism as a vital concept in analysing the setting and the characters constructed as “other” (Teo 241-261). The motifs of the harem and captivity became important in this context too, especially in connection with Emily Haddad’s article “Bound to Love” (42-64). The narrative analysis was done as group work and again focused strongly on pivotal scenes of the novel, such as the Recognition (Regis 36-37), the Point of Ritual Death (35-36) and the version was used to illustrate the practice of hiring European actors to play non-European characters, thereby enforcing the privileged narrative status as character focalizer. These differences and hierarchies also became apparent in the analysis of the intersection of the categories of race/nationality and gender—an approach that was transferred onto the 1921 US-American silent film adaptation starring Rudolph Valentino. The differences between the book and the film, such as the omission of rape scenes or the change in the first meeting of the protagonists, were analysed in light of the background of the time and place of production (e.g. laws banning inter-racial marriage/relationships and miscegenation) and with regard to plausibility to the intended audience of both book and film. Questions of ethnic/racial affiliation and their respective representations within the power dynamics of the desert romance were raised and led to an investigation into stereotypes of race and gender and the privileging of different sides of the hierarchical binary oppositions. The construction of dynamic hierarchies between protagonists and supporting characters in the text through narrative representation became one of the foci of the analysis as well as the heroine’s privileged narrative status as character focalizer. These differences and hierarchies also became apparent in the analysis of the different cover illustrations that have graced the novel The Sheik throughout the decades. Furthermore, the silent film version was used to illustrate the practice of hiring European actors to play non-European characters, thereby enforcing the notion of a possible slippage from the privileged category of difference into a non-privileged one, but prohibiting any movement from the non-privileged category to the privileged one. Silent film practices such as title cards, intertitles, background music and the distinctive acting style were analysed in comparison to contemporary and current expectations of a narrative film, in addition to the general implications of choice of actors and scenery. Here, the students’ initial reactions to the acting style, which encompassed statements such as “He [Valentino] looks completely ridiculous. I can’t take this film seriously” soon gave way to a deeper understanding of historical and technological developments of film as a medium, and its debt to theatrical traditions as well as, in case of the silent film, to melodrama.

Teaching in this segment was also highly influenced by student input. For example, one of the presenters on silent film analysis was not sure how to rate the importance and [End Page 9] effect of the real name of an actor appearing beneath the name of his character on the intertitle instead of being named in the final credits. This warranted further contextualization of the medium film within a wider debate concerning the moving image as illusion versus representing “reality.” The analysis identified the instance of the appearance of actor’s name on the intertitle as a means of breaking the fourth wall. This consequently serves to curb anxieties about miscegenation and the threatening Other for an audience that was still primarily perceived as passive and therefore open to the notion of the film as a reflection of “reality” at the time of the film’s production. In so doing, it was possible to demonstrate the impact these seemingly tangential questions that arise during a presentation can have, and to expose the intricate network of discursive effects that affects each and every form of representation in a certain medium.

The combination of Regency and desert setting in Kaye’s The Governess and the Sheikh confronted the students with their first category romance (published by Mills & Boon). By now, the students were, for the most part, able to work with concepts such as Orientalism on their own in study groups with only marginal input from the lecturer and could present their findings to the other groups, who had been performing analyses using a different approach. The gaze, interpreted as a narrative gaze in the sense of a focalizing character, representing a “point of view,” showed the incorporation of the male perspective into the desert romance novel. Whereas in The Sheikh the male protagonist and his thought process remain closed-off from the heroine, and by extension also from the reader, the hero of The Governess, Jamil, becomes available not just from the outside, by being described and looked at by the heroine, but actually by having his thought processes and feelings represented through character focalization as well. This serves to establish his attraction to and developing love for the heroine from the start, as opposed to the older novel, where the Declaration (Regis 34) has to take place in direct speech at the very end of the novel.

Moreover, the historical setting again provided for an interesting interpretation of the Regency and desert setting as liminal spaces for the negotiation of modern cultural issues. A group task for the students involved applying Jessica Taylor’s ideas on “[…] Gender, Race, and Orientalism in Contemporary Romance Novels” (1032-1051) to the novel. According to her
article, the construction of the Orient as an imaginary space and place is made believable by citing detailed (often stereotypical) images (of furniture, clothing, architecture) which evoke verisimilitude, even though the texts are set in “imaginary [desert] locations” and realms (1038). Thus, a fantastical space is produced that is nevertheless imbued with plausibility. The Orient consequently becomes knowable and controllable along with the male hero who is “tamed” by the white, Western heroine. The hero’s choice of the white female protagonist as a partner and thereby his participation in heterosexual monogamy is contrasted with the myth of the Oriental harem, the latter being subsequently dispelled in its function as a threat to the protagonists’ relationship. This clears the future for a modernized (i.e. westernized) Orient under the positive influence of a white female figure (1040-1024). The opening chapter of The Governess and the Sheikh was under particular scrutiny here, since it starts out from the male character’s perspective, making it obvious it is his society which is defined and centres the romance more firmly on equal ground in later chapters where the representation of both the male and female protagonists’ views are concerned. The description of lavish surroundings as well as the hero’s dealings with matters of state establish the contrast between what Taylor [End Page 10] calls details of reality and an imaginary (desert) realm (Kaye 7-18) and thus prove Taylor’s point.

A further interest of issue in this modern Mills & Boon romance was the fact that this was the first novel we read that contained explicit levels of (hetero)sexual longings and activity. A student presentation on the development of the rise of the more sexually explicit romance dealt with jay Dixon’s chapters on this topic in her book The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon 1909–1990s (133-153; 155-178) and detailed the relations between the Mills & Boon romance’s concept of “legitimate” or privileged expressions of heterosexual love, physical desire, and also violence as a form of character interaction. Concerning the actual description of the characters’ experience during sex, narrative perspective was of utmost importance, as well as Catherine Belsey’s idea about the bodily union being able to bridge a sort of Cartesian dualism (23). Talking about sex and sexual interaction, especially in connection with the emotions portrayed in the novel, it was surprising to see that most students were quite reluctant to discuss these scenes in detail in class—and if they did, they employed either rather inventive euphemisms that rivalled the romance’s vocabulary or they reduced a scene with full intercourse to the expression: “oh! they did the session.” Generally, I had assumed that explicit approaches to literature and the repeated use of terms like “penis envy” or “phallicus” would have done away with this disinclination. Even more interesting was the fact that it turned out a majority of my students wanted to incorporate Kaye’s “explicit content” novel into their end of term papers, and most of them willingly made reference to one or more of the sex scenes in order to analyse power structures, discourses of gender or the body. Therefore, the reluctance to discuss these scenes seemed to be directed towards an official teaching (or semi-public) context, and not the result of a general aversion towards reading and analysing them—thereby giving strong indication that the Mills & Boon romance that was dealt with constitutes part of a pleasure which is considered private, or at least experienced as belonging to a non-public space. The male student, in contrast, was confident in discussing the sexual aspects of the books, and was particularly interested in applying a psychoanalytical approach to the romances we discussed.

The final topical session was dedicated to the noticeable changes in the popular romance as we had traced them in the three exemplary texts. The wider context for these changes was covered by a discussion of Dawn Heinecken’s article “Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction” (149-172), which led to a further categorization and comparison of the novels’ protagonists as well as the pivotal plot points and developments.

The seminar ended with a revision session in which we collected the knowledge we had accumulated concerning the popular romance in general and the exemplary sub-generic texts in particular, while applying different approaches to the novels. Interactive collection of assembled knowledge made up most of this session, with the students devising a huge blackboard sketch with colour coding for information we had collected over the semester. This exercise was met with much enthusiasm and carried out very satisfactorily.

Noticeable among the students during the whole semester was that they had trouble shaking off their quick stereotypical judgments about the popular romance audience as “frustrated housewives,” even though the issue was made a topic of discussion at several points, clarifying that this idea about the popular romance audience was rooted in a 1970s/1980s feminist backlash and an older tradition of romance plots. Finally, I [End Page 11] conducted an anonymous evaluation of the seminar to get the students’ feedback in an attempt to judge the impact the seminar, the teaching style, and the information exchange had on them and if they thought any of this would shape their future studies. The overall feedback for the seminar was (grade-wise) between an A- and a B+ (overall average mark in numerus grading system was 1.58), and most of the students remarked on how surprised they had been that there were so many different things one could “do” (i.e. analyse) with a popular romance. The evaluation reflected a positive reception of the seminar’s structure and choice of primary and secondary texts. General topic preference was divided between desert and Regency romance and the respective approaches, but marketing strategies and the “romance industry” were also noted as subjects of great interest.

Also, out of fourteen students who took part in the evaluation, eleven claimed a notable increase in their interest in and knowledge about the topic of the seminar. The focus of this interest was also reflected in the choice of seminar paper topics. Twelve students completed the end-of-term assignment and were successful. The rest of the students finished the seminar as such, but did not hand in a seminar paper, some due to internships abroad and some due to mismanagement of time.

_Bath Tangle_ was the students’ favourite romance to work on in their papers, and was thus analysed by five students, who wrote about gender and gender difference, love relationships as a consequence of difference in categories of power, the function of the depiction of traditional gender roles, and issues of class and class distinctions. Three incorporated Hull’s _The Sheikh_ into their papers and examined issues of discourses of race and nationality, power relations and the gaze, as well as constructions of masculinity. As for _The Governess and the Sheikh_, four students decided to work with the text, respectively analysing gendered discourses, the gaze, Orientalism and the construction of power through categories of difference. One student was very interested in venturing into another romance subgenre for analysis and focused on Christine Feehan’s _The Lair of the Lion_ (2002) and the protagonists’ adherence to gender stereotypes in the gothic popular romance in comparison with stereotypical gothic novel characters. In general, the students exhibited a very good grasp of the approaches to the romance, even though a small number of the seminar papers that were handed in proved that they sometimes had difficulty distinguishing between the level of difficulty and narrative mediation. Moreover, they tended to confl ate the retrospective fictional construct of a historical era as a setting in the novel with the actual historical era and its characteristics—especially when dealing with topics such as gender constructions in _Bath Tangle_. Here, one of the papers kept referring to “actual” Regency gender positions and comparing them to the characters’ in the romance novel, not taking into account Heyer’s version of the Regency as a post-Regency retrospective construct. This level of abstraction was, however, achieved by most of the students after having dealt with the issue in class in the session on constructions of history.

In conclusion, if I offered this seminar again, I would attempt to incorporate different secondary texts and include one
session to actually analyse first-wave romance novel criticism in detail to help historicise judgments about the popular romance and its readers. Moreover, I would try to direct some of the discussion even more, since sometimes the group works did, for all of some students’ efforts, not result in as much academic interaction as previously anticipated—which then had the effect of the lecturer having to intervene in order to bring the session to a satisfactory ending. It would also be interesting to focus on different subgenres, such as paranormal romance and maybe historical [End Page 12] paranormal romance, with emphases on conceptualizations of the Other and the inclusion of gothic or horror elements. To sum it up, though, the seminar touched upon various literary and cultural studies approaches and demonstrated the multiplicity of possibilities as well as the versatility of the Regency and desert romance and its changing strategies of negotiating social position, class issues, gender standards and stereotypes as well as ideas of racial and ethnic categories. [End Page 13]

Appendix I.

1 My degree course was started before the German university system switched to the BA and MA system in late 2007 (“Studengänge und Prüfungen.”). Thus, the degree I studied for was the Magister Artium (M.A.), a degree mainly designed to prepare the student for a further academic career in his or her field. The average period of education was nine semesters, i.e. four and a half years. This period could be extended if, for example, students were to go abroad for one or two semesters. The final paper (called Magisterarbeit), roughly probably equivalent to a Master’s thesis, with eighty to a hundred pages in length, was the Magister thesis I handed in at this stage. After passing final examinations in both written and oral form, I was awarded the title M.A. The main difference to the Master of Arts is that there was no prior degree (like a BA) that had to be attained before you could complete your studies at M.A. level. Thus, subsequently, I was accepted as a doctoral candidate/ PhD candidate and started working towards my PhD thesis (called Dissertation in German). [End Page 14]

2 For a better understanding of the hierarchical structure at the FAU, see Appendix 1. It has to be noted that the term ‘Chair’ does not denote just one professor and his/her position but instead encompasses one professor who holds the chair as well as various subordinate members of staff, ranking from post-doctoral lecturers to doctoral candidates who can also hold a teaching position.

3 The term module is here intended in the British English sense of “each of a set of independent units of study or training that can be combined in a number of ways to form a course at a college or university […]” (“module.”). In this context of meaning, module is taken to be interchangeable with the term seminar, which, also being in the German descriptive title of the module, signals a preoccupation of both a limited number of students and the teacher with one overall topic which is discussed in a thorough, if not exhaustive manner (“seminar.”). Both terms also hint at the difference from a lecture, which would mainly involve input from the lecturer and less actual work (i.e. group work, discussions, presentations) on the students’ part.

4 An especially interesting aspect here is that most of the popular romance publications in Germany are actually translations from the US-American or British market. There are some German romance authors, like Michelle Raven, for example, who writes romantic suspense, but they are few and far between. Thus, those students who attended my seminar and professed to be actual fans of popular romance were already familiar with the genre being dominated by British and US-American authors. Therefore, they were already familiar with authors like Georgette Heyer or Barbara Cartland.

5 The module on popular romance as such, a type of seminar officially called Proseminar in German, is an independent elective module, to be taken after the students have completed a basic seminar and advanced seminar in literary studies (Grund- und Aufbaukurs Literatur) as well as at least the introductory module in cultural studies (Grundkurs Culture). The advanced module in Cultural Studies, in which the students are supposed to read and analyse first-hand scholarly texts, is obligatory only for BA students (Krug 4-5), not for those pursuing a teaching degree (Mittmann 4-7). These basic or
advanced seminars last one semester each, so by the time the students are eligible to attend the Proseminar described here, they are at least into their second year, i.e. third semester. The majority of my students were advanced undergraduates, most of them in their fourth semester, with two fifth-semester students, one sixth-semester student, and one who was in their eighth semester at the time. BA students made up the bulk of attendees, followed closely in number by the teaching degree students, the latter aspiring to become English teachers for the German classroom.

[6] These assessments are part of the general structure of the seminar as fixed in the examination rules for the whole course of study. For the different Proseminare to result in students having the same formal academic training in oral and written argumentation, which is essential in order to advance to the next level of their studies, the examinations and final assignments have to be comparable concerning their basic requirements.

[7] Here, a general introduction to postmodern conceptions of history was attempted, featuring scholars such as Hayden White and his notion of Meta-history, Jean-Francois Lyotard’s idea of grand narratives as well as Linda Hutcheon’s term historiographic metafiction. [End Page 15]

Works Cited


Love in the Desert: Images of Arab-American Reconciliation in Contemporary Sheikh Romance Novels
by Stacy E. Holden

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Dr. Geneva Gray woke to the sound of nomads attacking her archaeological camp, which, though technically in Egypt, bordered all too closely the kingdom of Bah'shar.1 Taken captive, the American was presented by the desert marauders as a gift to Sheikh Zafir bin Rashid al-Khalifa, leader of this fictional Arab country. Zafir recognizes Dr. Gray, or [End Page 1] Genie, for they had once dated when they both attended the same American college. Ten years ago, Genie had broken off the relationship after Zafir had informed her of his impending arranged marriage and then asked her to return to his kingdom as his mistress. Now a widower, Zafir does not endorse the illegal detention of Americans, but his response to this crisis is dictated by the cultural and political conditions of his Arab kingdom. “The ways of the desert are ancient and cannot be changed overnight,” he says (Harris, “Kept” 121). Bowing to political exigencies in Bah’shar, Zafir forces Genie to return to his palace in Al-Shahar, promising the noted scholar that in return for her captivity he will grant her exclusive rights to excavate the precious temples of the capital city. Thrown together, their simmering attraction threatens to blossom into love, a dangerous situation since Zafir’s people may not be ready to accept a Western queen. After an assassination attempt, the Sheikh sends his lady love back home, stating simply “we are two different people from two different worlds” (Harris, “Kept” 144).

The notion that Arabs and Westerners are “two different worlds” has a long history in Western high art and popular culture, but its current iteration reflects a historically specific pessimism about Arab-American relations that has shaped cultural production in the post-9/11 world. Although not all Arabs are Muslim, and although the majority of the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims are not Arab, American popular media routinely conflate the two categories, such that news broadcasts, films, television series, and potboilers reify the various peoples of the Middle East and North Africa into a single homogeneous entity that is dark, dangerous, religiously “other,” and dead set against the West (Markovitz; Shaheen; Takacs). American popular culture has thus fused the “Global War on Terror” announced by President Bush after the 9/11 attacks with the “Clash of Civilizations” predicted by Samuel Huntington in the 1990s, presenting conflict between an American-led West and an Arab-led Islamic East as the defining feature of international relations in the early twenty-first century (Huntington).

By my count, Harlequin and Silhouette have published at least eighty sheikh romance novels by twenty-one American authors since 9/11. According to cultural historian and literary scholar Hsu-Ming Teo, these stories of desert love can be read as subversive tracts, for they are presently the only form of American popular culture consistently evoking compassion for Arabs or the Arab world (Teo 216; 301-303). This compassion hinges on a cross-cultural exchange of values: the heroine ultimately embraces the family-oriented culture of the Arab world, while the sheikh adopts the liberal feminist agenda of his Western beloved and her compatriots (Teo 233).

Teo describes sheikh romance novels as “a valuable historical archive showing how ordinary, educated women understand and interpret Arabs, Muslims, citizenship, and belonging, and Western relations with the Middle East” (26). True to form, the ending of Harris’s novella “Kept by the Sheikh” helps scholars to appreciate one author’s political imagination in a post-9/11 world. This story does not end with Zafir and Genie in separate worlds, but rather brings the couple and their cultures together. Zafir changes the law prohibiting Bah’shar’s rulers from marrying foreigners and also holds a special vote to ensure that his people agree with him—which, conveniently, they do (Harris, “Kept” 186). And so, Zafir’s love for the American fosters democratic process, or at least some version of it, in the Arab world.

The ending of “Kept by the Sheikh” becomes more significant when contextualized with its author’s life story. Like many Americans, Harris has a deeply vested interest in the [End Page 2] War on Terror now being waged in various areas of the Arab world. The forty-seven year old author not only grew up in a military family—both her mother and father were soldiers—but is also the wife of an officer, a now-retired Technical Sergeant in the Air Force. Harris is as close to a “blue-blooded” American as found in this national melting pot, for she is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization in which descendants of those who fought for American independence actively promote patriotism through various charitable endeavors. On 11 September 2001, she was at the Ramstein Air Base in Germany, and her thoughts turned immediately to the precarious future of her husband and those who served with him. In fact, she had only just returned that very day from a visit to him in Italy, where he was then deployed to Italy supporting Operation Joint Forge, a NATO effort in support of Kosovo (Harris, email, 16 February 2014; Harris, interview, 16 July 2013).

Harris—much like the ten other authors and three editors interviewed for this article—denies an explicit intent to address politics in her romance novels, but both the text of her novels and the transcripts of her interviews belie this unassuming assertion. Indeed, the author reveals a belief that her novels may well contribute to a better American understanding of the Arab world. Analyzing the sheikh, a composite Arab hero that essentializes the region’s political and cultural complexities, she notes that “I think it’s important for romance reader to think of him as a man, to know that he is sexy and desirable as a man from their own culture could be. Maybe that’s naive of me, but I choose to believe having sheikhs populate romance novels makes readers think of them as people, not terrorists or Islamic fundamentalists who hate America” (Harris, email, Follow Up, 11 February 2013).

In this essay, I expand and supplement the textual archive relied on by Teo by adding a new set of documents: interviews with some of the “ordinary, educated women” who write and publish these texts. Methodologically, I am a historian by training—one whose work previously analyzed the political and economic conditions of Morocco and Iraq via oral history and
The Popularity of Sheikh Romances in the Post-9/11 World

Among the sheikh romance authors whose work straddles the dividing line of the 9/11 attacks, few have been as consistently popular as Susan Mallery, whom Teo identifies as a “master of this genre” (Teo 284). Long before writing a sheikh romance, Mallery had admired the sheikh romance author Barbara Faith, who had been the sole author allowed to pen such novels for the category line Silhouette Special Edition. In 1998, three years after Faith’s death, Mallery’s editor, Karen Richman, invited her to submit a proposal for a sheikh romance novel in that line (Mallery, interview). Richman recalls that Silhouette had identified the author as a rising star and “so our plan was to go out with a three-book series, in three consecutive months to help market the series and profile her writing” (Richman, email). On a road trip through Louisiana with friend and fellow author Christina Dodd, Mallery plotted the trilogy. “I started with three books and really never thought I would do more,” she explained, “but the reader interest was huge and the mail started pouring in. So I kept writing them” (Mallery, interview in Shoemaker).

The popularity of Mallery’s “Desert Rogue Series,” now thirteen volumes strong, may be partly due to the author’s self-consciously idealized version of the Arab world. Each of Mallery’s books takes place in a fictional country located on the Arabian peninsula, and each country is explicitly described in both the text and in interviews as standing slightly apart from that real-world context, a “Switzerland of the Middle East” (Mallery, email; Kidnapped 179; Princess 11). Mallery does not set her books in real places, she has explained, because:

> The real world of the Middle East is complex and difficult. There are religious differences and deadly conflicts. My books are about taking people away from the real world. So I created my own countries where my romantic stories can take place. There’s [sic] no religious issues, no war, no disagreements, except between the hero and heroine (Mallery, interview in Shoemaker).

In this quote, we find Mallery emphasizing a negative stereotype of the Arab world put forth in the nightly news as a lived reality in the Arab world. She is unapologetic in her decision to omit the media representations of disturbing events in real life and the negative stereotypes, thereby sanitizing this place it for consumption by her readers, most of whom are American.

Mallery’s effort to keep “real world” issues outside the borders of her novels was put to the test in 2001. The fourth book in her series was due out in November 2001, two months after 9/11. Since this book, titled The Sheikh and the Runaway Princess, had gone into production ten months earlier, the publisher could not change its plans and replace the monthly category romance with, for example, a tale of a fireman, which would have directly reflected American sensibilities after 9/11. The editorial staff at Silhouette worried that the book would not sell. After all, they had witnessed firsthand the trauma of 9/11. The American headquarters of Silhouette is in downtown Manhattan, and its employees saw smoke from the Twin Towers from their office windows as they followed news of the crisis on TV. Richman remembers, “we were a little worried about how readers would react, especially with the fourth book in the series set to be published right after that terrible tragedy” (Richman, email). With two sheikh books in production, Mallery predicted extremely low sales and believed her career might be over (Mallery, interview). Sharing her concerns, editors at Silhouette re-named the sixth book, which was in production and due to be released in June 2002. Eliminating the Arab term “sheikh,” the editors titled the book The Prince and the Pregnant Bride, an ethnically neutral term that sidestepped potential antipathy about the Arab world (Mallery, email).

The fears of the Silhouette editorial staff proved unfounded, and Mallery went on to publish another seven books set in her fictional Arab world. Indeed, Mallery insists that there was “not a blip in sales. Nothing” (Mallery, interview). Since each of her sheikh romances had a press run of 100,000 copies, these culminated in sales of 1.3 million books (Reardon).

The popularity of Mallery’s series is not an anomaly, for other authors have found that 9/11 did not affect continuing interest in her books. Sheikhs were not a top priority for Silhouette’s marketing plan, so Mallery set about doing more to promote her books. "We decided to do a special edition line. Mallery and her editor Karen Richman made themselves available on multiple occasions via email and in person." Other first-hand accounts—and so I am keenly aware of a need to expand the source base for examining the cultural trends represented by sheikh romances. For this essay, I interviewed eleven authors and three editors. This article was particularly influenced by interviews with six authors and two editors of Harlequin Presents, a category line specializing in stories about “alpha males, decadent glamour and jet-set lifestyles” set in a “sensational, sophisticated world” (Harlequin Presents).

Another important resource was Susan Mallery, author of the Desert Rogue Series published by Harlequin in the Silhouette Special Edition line. Mallery and her editor Karen Richman made themselves available on multiple occasions via email and in person.

These interviews suggest authors of sheikh romances consciously and deliberately struggle against the negative stereotypes of Arabs perpetrated by the media and other vehicles of popular culture. They do so by deploying some of the more positive—indeed, one might say exotically upbeat—stereotypes drawn from the long history of Orientalist fiction and film. In a complex negotiation between their own desires, the traditions of the genre, and the expectations of readers and publishers, sheikh romance authors embrace an ideal of Arab-American reconciliation, albeit one in which the happy ending occurs according to Western sensibilities.
Thus, the arid climate of Mallery's desert setting dominates fictive Lucia-Serrat, which is an island country purported to be in the East that inserts these countries into the existing state system. Bahania is squeezed next to the United Arab Emirates, while El Bahar is located between Bahania and the hidden city-state the City of Thieves. And so, nearly without exception, authors of sheikh romances set their fictional countries in the desert. Mallery, for example, has created a network of desert states in the Middle East proper, including Bahania, El Bahar and the hidden city-state the City of Thieves.

Indeed, desert terrain exists for Mallery even in places where it would actually be a near impossibility for it to be present. Like Marton and Harris, Mallery has found that sheikh romances provide “such an Other experience, and I think Americans are fascinated with that” (Harris, interview, 28 April 2015). One critical tenet of these sheikh romances provide “such an Other experience, and I think Americans are fascinated with that” (Harris, interview, 28 April 2015). Sandra Marton left Harlequin Presents and began to self-publish in 2013, initiating this risky business venture with a sheikh hero, an economically driven decision that underscores the popularity of the Arab fantasy with readers.

Overall, the numbers of sheikh romance novels increased notably after 9/11, even as wars in Afghanistan and Iraq heated up. Teo has compiled a revealing graph that demonstrates the numbers of sheikh romances published in a given year between 1969 and 2007. With numbers hovering around six in 2000, the lines of the graph morphs into a severe incline in 2002, with eighteen sheikh romances published that year (Teo 5). A reporter for the Chicago Tribune counted four sheikh romance novels a year published in the 1990s, compared with seventeen—quadrupling that modest tally—in the first six years of the twenty-first century (Reardon).

Forging a Fictional Kingdom

The political fantasy of the sheikh romance lies in the happy union of the two people from vastly different worlds, the United States and a generalized Arab region. Lynn Raye Harris notes that her American readers find the Arab world “so foreign, so Other.” Harris has an MA in English and so is familiar with theoretical Othering in Western imperial texts. She notes that these sheikh romances provide “such an Other experience, and I think Americans are fascinated with that” (Harris, interview, 28 April 2015). One critical tenet of the novels, then, is that the world of the Arab potentate is differentiated from that of the American heroine.

Authors of sheikh romances universally situate their storylines among desert sands, a terrain abandoned in modern times, in order to underscore the differences between the Arab hero and his American heroine. They do this despite the fact that rates of urbanization in the Arabian peninsula, the heart of the Arab world, hover between 80 and 90 per cent (Barakat 29). Jane Porter notes that, “I don’t think I’ve ever written a Sheikh story that spends more than maybe twenty or thirty pages in North America. My Sheikh stories always take place in the desert” (Porter, interview 1 May 2014). This setting is unfamiliar—and attractive—to Western readers. In this way, the authors forge a fantastical kingdom that draws upon Orientalist notions. “Sand, camel, desert…tent,” recites Harris, who reflects on these heavily charged common nouns and asserts that “readers need the key words, because they create the world in their head” (Harris, interview, 17 July 2013).

Maisey Yates unwittingly broke this unspoken rule as a first time author of sheikh romances. In drafting The Inherited Bride, she wrote a story in which Princess Isabella Rossi of Turan seeks out some semblance of a normal life before doing her duty to her country by undertaking an arranged marriage to High Sheikh Hassan al bin Sudar of Umarah. When Hassan’s brother Adham seeks her out in Paris, the two—at least, in the initial draft—embark on a Mediterranean vacation in which the princess engages in “normal” activities, like eating hamburgers or walking in the streets, while the couple fall in love. Mention of the desert came late in the novel, thus being downplayed. After Yates submitted her draft, she notes that her “editor…sent me a revision letter, and she was, like, what is the point of doing a sheikh if you never have them in the desert? That is not what readers want. She said, what they go it to for is for this setting, and you haven’t given them that…You need to, you know, move the desert part forward because you are not fulfilling the fantasy” (Yates, interview). The setting establishes the hero’s credibility as a man from the Arab world, and this sets up the cultural differences between him and his leading lady, which is one inevitably wrought with political overtones.

And so, nearly without exception, authors of sheikh romances set their fictional countries in the desert. Mallery, for example, has created a network of desert states in the Middle East proper, including Bahania, El Bahar and the hidden city-state the City of Thieves. These countries are rentier states. Thus, oil production largely accounts for the personal fortune of $14 billion of the royal family of El Bahania (Mallery, Prince and Pregnant 14). Her books are illustrated with a map of the Middle East that inserts these countries into the existing state system. Bahania is squeezed next to the United Arab Emirates, while El Bahar is contiguous with the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and Saudi Arabia. In some sense, Mallery is counting on her readership’s vague knowledge of this region, for “Oman,” she notes, “is just gone, and I apologize to the people” (Mallery, interview). The author is quite conscious of her use of the desert setting as a genre trope, one whose familiarity is critical to the success of these romances. “The oasis,” she thus notes, “speaks to the traditional and stereotypical view of the desert. But it’s fun, and if they can have sex at the oasis, all the better” (Mallery, email).

Indeed, desert terrain exists for Mallery even in places where it would actually be a near impossibility for it to be present. Thus, the arid climate of Mallery’s desert setting dominates fictive Lucia-Serrat, which is an island country purported to be in
the Indian Ocean, where, presumably, tropical terrain and sultry beaches would prevail. But even [End Page 7] natives of Lucía-Serrat, like ruler Prince Rafiq, though American on his mother’s side and educated in the West, feel the tug of the desert. Much of the novel takes place in California, where Rafiq has set up an office. And yet, when informed of his heroine’s virginity, he feels “the ancient blood of his heritage, of those long-gone desert warriors” (Mallery, Virgin 125). In a like manner, Kiley, his love interest, finds that Rafiq, like all princes of tropical Lucía-Serrat, has “the desert blood that flowed through their bodies [and] made them loyal unto death” (Mallery, Virgin 229). The desert defines the sheikh romance even when it is not directly set in the desert, not least because the desert influences the personality of the hero.

Mallery’s Rafiq is not the only protagonist for whom the environment determines personality. Maisey Yates has published three sheikh romances for the category line Harlequin Presents. In Forged in Desert Heat her readers find that hero Zafar Nejem of fictive Al Sabah “wasn’t just from the desert; the desert was in him” (64). As he informs his love interest Ana, “The desert can make you feel strong and free, but it also makes you very conscious of the fact that you are mortal” (28). According to Yates, “My personal vision of a sheikh is a man steeped in tradition, and also honor. A man who is perhaps out of step with the modern world, because of how ‘apart’ he is in his desert kingdom. Deserts are harsh, so in my mind this creates the image of a man born to withstand the harshness of the world” (Yates, email).

Lynne Raye Harris is also fascinated with the desert and admits her choice of setting for her sheikh romances has been influenced by her reading of The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, the memoir of T.E. Lawrence—Lawrence of Arabia—in a graduate class on the Middle East.Focused on the Arab Revolt of 1916 in the area that is now the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula, this British memoir was published three years after E.M. Hull’s novel The Sheik (1919), a book often identified as the forebearer of today’s sheikh romance. An abridged version of that novel, Revolt in the Desert, came out five years later, its title speaking to the Western fascination with this seemingly deadly foreign terrain. Much like E.M. Hull’s novel, The Seven Pillars of Wisdom takes place in an untamed desert in which, ultimately, a Westerner “gone native” brings order and civilization to Arab society. Harris fabricates desert kingdoms for her sheikh based partly on Lawrence’s descriptions. “I know there are problems with Lawrence’s interpretation,” she admits, “and yet Pillars is so poetic that it does capture the imagination completely” (Harris, email 16 December 2011).

Like Mallery and Yates, Harris links the physical setting to the personality of her main character. The fictive kingdom of Jahfar, for example, is ruled by Adan Najib Al Dhakir. Here, the desert looms as an ominous force, for it seems—mistakenly—that his wife Isabella Maro had killed herself by walking into its shifting sands. Adan finds his amnesiac wife very much alive—and singing in a bar in Hawaii (another highly exoticized area populated by non-white people). The moment that he finds her, he “had the look of the desert, that hawklike intensity of a man who lived life on the edge of civilization” (Strangers 12). It is no surprise that Harris contends that “the desert is wild and untamable in many ways and, presumably, a man who comes from that wilderness is also a bit wilder than any other type of contemporary romance hero” (Harris, email, “Follow Up,” 11 February 2013).

Culture Clash

[End Page 8] Emphasizing difference, Harris asserts of Arabs that “their country, their land, their customs—everything is so foreign to us as Westerners” (Harris, interview, 16 July 2013). Romance authors take pains to introduce a mysterious and somewhat colorful setting to their readers in order to establish that their sheikhs comes from a foreign culture. Reflecting and re-fracting common American beliefs, the authors portray a standardized Arab culture that is distinct from that of the United States. In doing so, they recycle common Orientalist conceptions—patriarchy, despotism, and exoticism—that have littered American literature since the colonial age. In relying on stereotypes that have been perpetuated for 300 years, the “foreignness” of the Arab place is in fact quite familiar to Western readers; authors are not unaware of this paradox. “It’s a tad embarrassing to realize I’m playing into Western stereotypes,” notes Harris, “and yet I also have to say that I couldn’t write the story any other way.” As she delves into the reasons for this necessity, Harris shifts from the language of political critique—“playing into Western stereotypes”—to what she calls “the literary side.” “Taking it to the literary side of things,” she explains, “the story plays into underlying myths...that speak to the collective unconscious of the romance reader” (Harris, email 16 December 2011).

Many authors highlight their heroes in the text—not in the cover art—as an Arab Other by depicting them as wearing native costume. The hero may look good in an Armani suit, but he is far better-suited to desert robes, which his American heroine finds striking and sexy. Sabrina Johnson, for example, is a princess of El Bahania, but she also meets the criteria of an ordinary Western career woman, a must in modern-day American romances (Teo 222). She was, after all, raised in Los Angeles by her American mother and is a historian by training. Sabrina is in the desert looking for the fabled City of Thieves when its mysterious ruler Kardal rescues her from a deadly sandstorm. He is “dressed traditionally in burmose and djellaba” (Mallery, Runaway 11). Despite being held captive, Sabrina is increasingly captivated by Kardal, “Desert sand,” she asserts, again highlighting his Arab Other-ness, “flowed through his veins” (Mallery, Runaway 119). This non-Western facet of Kardal makes her heart beat faster, as evidenced by Sabrina’s sartorial musings that, “Today he wore Western garb—a well-tailored suit in dark gray with a white shirt and red tie. She wasn’t used to seeing him dressed like a businessman. In some ways she found that she preferred Kardal in more traditional clothing” (Mallery, Runaway 159).

Amira Jarmakani has analyzed descriptions of clothing in sheikh romances and found that these texts “covertly racialize” the Arab Other (Jarmakani 919). In the United States, Arabs struggled within the court system to be recognized as “Caucasian” in the early-twentieth century (Beydoun). Jarmakani, however, argues that descriptions of Arabs in sheikh romances do more than attend neutrally to ethnic differentiation, thereby belying American legal understandings of whiteness. Instead, she warns of an ominous racial logic underpinning the desert fantasy. Authors use overt references to race or racialization are hard to find;” Jarmakani argues that “covert articulations of race, sometimes coded through the tropes of ethnicity or region, play a vital role in exoticizing and eroticizing the hero” (Jarmakani 906). She hypothesizes that “the most obvious or salient way in which sheikhs are covertly racialized through cultural markers are in what amounts to a fetishization of ‘Arabian’ forms of cultural dress” (Jarmakani 919).

Indeed, conversations with romance authors suggest that the promoting of an interracial romance is part and parcel of the fantasy that they want to create for their readers. Yates, a European-American married to an African-American man, deals [End Page 9] comfortably with issues of race and interracial relationships, which, for her, can be part of a romantic fantasy. Thus, she penned The Highest Price to Pay, which centered on a white fashion designer who falls for an investor from sub-Saharan Africa. Yates admits that she looks for elements of inter racial romance, even in sheikh novels. And yet, in a conversation between Yates and Sharon Kendrick, it becomes clear that these are not easy to find. The latter shares that her editor took out a scene where the heroine looked down and found that sheikh’s “hand looked so very dark against her
The sensual element in the desert romance, "states Porter, highlighting the Arab world as distinct and different, "with the silent film women than meet them on an online dating service?" (Porter, postmodern, egalitarian present. "Sheikh romances," the author asserts, "don't have to be politically correct. In fact, usually..."

The establishment of seemingly incompatible lifestyles and values between the two protagonists is of primary importance to and that of his American captive. "The American didn't understand his world," he reflects. "His world was primitive and it fit..."

The economic system of Saudi Arabia on Dubauc, which she invents as a state in northwest Africa on the border of the Sahara desert and seemingly in close proximity to Mauritania, a poor country whose GDP relies on fishing and some minerals, like copper and iron. Despite the logistics of the fictive country's placement, however, Dubauc is modeled loosely on Saudi Arabia, for it is an oil-producing state, which is a rarity on the African continent. (Only two African nations are known for oil production: Algeria in North Africa, and Nigeria in West Africa.)

Marton superimposes not only the economic system of Saudi Arabia on Dubauc, but also its culture. In the opening of the book, Sheikh Tariq al Sayf engages in an "ancient custom" as a rite of mourning. Reflecting on his lost brother, he carries a hawk on his arm into the "endless silence of the desert" (Marton, Defiant 7). Chanting his brother's name, Tariq unleashes the hood of the hawk and sets him free, hoping this action helps his brother's spirit find peace.

Marton's inspiration for this scene came from an exhibit on Saudi Arabian culture that she visited in London. There, the curator had arranged for a goshawk and his keeper to be maintained as part of the cultural experience for foreign visitors. Marton was allowed to put on a glove and hold the traditional bird of prey treasured and conserved on the Arabian peninsula. She notes that, "when I wrote that first chapter where he's burying his brother and he sets his brother's hawk free, that's what I went back to, was that moment..." wrote that from my own feelings of what I felt that bird on my wrist wanted, which was to remain with me, but to be free to fly, which was a wonderful moment and I was able to use it" (Marton, interview). In this way, Marton clearly attends to the emotional impact of an American engaging Saudi culture, but she standardizes it so that the particularities of different countries merge into a single Arab world.

In this instance, the author anchored the culture of her fictive Arab kingdom in the real traditions of one country in the Arab world, but that is not always the case. Mallory, for example, draws inspiration for a fantastical Arab culture from a variety of literary and cinematic sources, many of which scholars would deem part and parcel of the Orientalist canon. For example, she distinctly remembers purchasing Georgia Elizabeth Taylor's 1978 historical romance The Infidel at a yard sale while in high school. Set in eleventh century Spain, when Arabs ruled Al Andalus, this book recounts the story of the fictional first wife of El Cid, who fought the ruling Moors. Violet Winspear's Palace of the Pomegranate was the first sheikh romance that she ever read, and this, too, has been an inspiration in her perpetuation of sheikh romances set in the desert. An early Harlequin Presents, it tells the tale of socialite Grace Wilde, who falls in love with Kharim Khan while on an expedition in the Persian desert. Clearly drawn to Orientalist romance, Mallory also attributes inspiration to a 1986 TV movie called "The Harem" with Art Malik and Nancy Travis, in which the British heroine is taken captive by an Arab hero with whom she falls in love (Mallory, interview).

And so, the Arab world constructed by Mallory is an amalgam of these highly exoticized presentations (and a real host for those who have done hard traveling in an actual desert). Given the economic wealth of the protagonists in Mallory’s novels, she can “do some research on art or architecture and then just, you know, put sequins on it, metaphorically” (Mallory, interview). Thus, there are not only opulent palaces in Mallory’s work that date back to the eleventh century, but also fantastical desert encampments in which tents the size of small condos are provisioned with plush carpets, generators flushing in cool air, and tubs of steaming water (Bride Who Said No 208). In this way, Mallory grounds her works in a fantasy that eschews discussion of any factual differences between the US and specific countries of the Middle East and North Africa, instead celebrating an exoticized fantasy about a glamorous Arab culture.

Marton and Mallory are not the only authors to enunciate a standardized—and perhaps misleadingly colorful—Arab culture that is deliberately distinct from that of the American heroine. Jane Porter created the fictive sheikh kingdom of Ouahia in North Africa. The Sheikh's Disobedient Bride takes place among the foothills of the Atlas Mountains, which run along the northern Sahara Desert. Porter had not yet traveled to Morocco when she wrote these romance novels, the actual site of this mountain range, but she enjoyed doing research on this country. A constitutional monarchy, Morocco claims an urban population of 57 per cent.[5] The author, however, does not set her tale among the bright lights and tall buildings of densely populated Essaouira or Agadir, coastal cities near the Atlas Mountains. Instead, the plot takes place in a barren region where the American photographer Tally is kidnapped by Ouahian rebels while on assignment in Baraka. She is then held captive by their leader Tair. It comes as no surprise that Porter emphasizes how distinct her Arab hero is from American men; Tally finds he is a "man wedded to the desert" (Porter, Disobedient 56).

Porter’s construction of Sheikh Tair fits an autocratic, "archetypal" mold promoted by authors of desert romances. Speaking in general of sheikh heroes, Sharon Kendrick, the one British author interviewed for this study, insists that the sheikh is “the archetypal match-up man because he’s powerful, he has that kind of cruel side that women fantasize about and find very attractive, and he’s usually autocratic because he owns a very great, oil rich country” (Kendrick, interview). And, indeed, the political culture of Ouahia’s rebels is premised on notions of despotism, albeit benevolently implemented. “My word here,” Tair tells Tally, “is law. Anything I want, I get” (Porter, Disobedient 60). Tair himself contrasts the impact between his culture and that of his American captive. “The American didn’t understand his world,” he reflects. “His world was primitive and it fit him...”In the desert, [End Page 11] justice was meted out by a fierce and unwavering hand. If not nature’s, than his" (Porter, Disobedient 75). Thus, the desert setting renders Tair an Oriental despot, and his power over life and death sets the sheikh apart from his Western counterparts.

The establishment of seemingly incompatible lifestyles and values between the two protagonists is of primary importance to Porter, who takes pains to highlight the cultural differences that Tally and Tair must overcome in order to be together: differences marked not simply as those between East and West, but between a pre-modern, patriarchal past and a postmodern, egalitarian present. “Sheikh romances," the author asserts, “don’t have to be politically correct. In fact, usually they aren’t” (Porter, email 5 December 2014). Porter thus has her hero call his lady love “woman” for most of The Sheikh’s Disobedient Bride, while Tally can’t believe that she would “fall for a Berber sheikh? For a man that would rather kidnap women than meet them on an online dating service?” (Porter, Disobedient 141). The book’s plot pays clear homage to the silent film The Sheik, as does its emphasis on the erotic appeal of the sheikh romance tradition. “There’s an intensely sensual element in the desert romance,” states Porter, highlighting the Arab world as distinct and different, “with the
powerful, mysterious sheikh as lover, that you don’t find in any other culture, and the appeal has been Valentino” (Porter, email 5 December 2014). Much like its cinematic predecessor, this particular romance provides a captivating narrative in which Tally falls in love with her captor. The tangles of the plot also nod at this Orientalist classic, for Tair saves Tally from a deadly sandstorm after she tries to escape his encampment. “The whole Valentino myth,” Porter states eighty-one years after the release of The Sheik, “you know, that’s kind of what American Westerners fell in love with.” The readers, she continues, musing on the expectations of her audience, “don’t compare me to history, they don’t compare me to facts, they compare me to the other writers who do the genre...So, you play with archetypes, reader expectations, and then what you as a writer kind of bring to that book” (Porter, interview 1 May 2014).

Ultimately, Porter’s plotline—like that of other sheikh romance authors—deliberately emphasizes the differences between an Arab sheikh and his American love interest. Porter identifies this distinction as part of her “personal fantasy” (Porter, interview 18 July 2013). Tally, for example, pushes Tair to see that “we’re completely different culturally. Our values clash, our interests don’t align” (Porter, Disobedient 151). Even upon realizing her feelings for Tair, Tally will admit, “Yes, she loved him but she didn’t understand him or his culture” (Porter, Disobedient 155). Porter may not have yet visited Morocco or North Africa, but her trips to other non-Western places, such as Japan and Turkey, have influenced her writing of sheikh romances. She finds that, “I like the culture clash, and I’ve always used that” (Porter, interview 18 July 2013). In this way, Porter sets up a plotline in which protagonists of dissimilar cultures are thrown together in the desert, an isolated setting that inescapably forces them to confront their differences.

**Spoiler Alert! Cultural Tensions Resolved**

Ultimately, the hero and heroine fall in love, for a Happily Ever After ending is a must in any romance novel, but this action is complicated by the need for an Arab sheikh and his American love interest to overcome a host of cultural differences. “You’re [End Page 12] fascinated by the history and the culture and the differences, which are fascinating differences,” notes Sandra Marton, enunciating a common premise among authors of sheikh romances, but, she continues:

> the one feeling I do get, is that I can say something positive. I do agree there that I can say, in effect, to the reader: it’s not as cut and dry as you think it is. These people are not one stereotypical individual. There are differences, just as there are among westerners. And I think that’s a very valid part of what we do, which is to remind readers that not everyone is a newspaper headline (Marton, interview 18 July 2013).

It is clear that Marton consciously perceives her work as playing a “positive” role, however modest, in how American readers conceptualize a troubled and often demonized area of the world. Yet like other authors, she is caught between the desire to explore differences among her Arab and Western characters—“these people are not one stereotypical individual”; “not everyone is a newspaper headline”—and her desire to promote a fantasy of reconciliation that is not just between two individuals, but more broadly between their two disparate cultures: a reconciliation which often does rely on stereotypes, if only as a genre-defining shorthand.

The complexity of this task is visible in what authors say about their intentions concerning sheikh romance novels. For example, many clearly intend for their Arab hero to stand out not only as a foreign potentate but also as a man with individual and universal characteristics that transcend any one ethnic identity. Maisey Yates explains that “it’s important to me that all of my characters are treated with respect and treated as individuals, regardless of their backgrounds.” She continues:

> Not to say culture doesn’t inform certain elements of character, but I feel like depending too much on what you ‘think’ an Arab hero would do is a danger. What would this hero do? That’s the most important question. He’s a human being like any other hero from any other race/culture (Yates, email 26 March 2013).

In a like manner, Lynne Raye Harris does not deny the political implications of an Arab hero and an American heroine finding their Happily Ever After, but she, too, wants to ensure that her readers see beyond the particularities of his ethnic identity. “As my editor always tells me,” she explains, “he is a character with the same problems and wants and needs as anyone else. Where he comes from is secondary—and yet it does play into who he is, especially when coupled with a Western heroine” (Harris, email 16 December 2011). The careful negotiation between sameness and difference that Harris describes as playing out in editorial discussions—ultimately, sameness is primary, though difference must be there—can also be found in any given sheikh romance’s denouement, and in the political fantasy offered in it.

Sheikh romance authors often see themselves as putting forward an alternative fantasy of the Middle East: one that emphasizes attraction, rather than fear, and one that implicitly contradicts Huntington’s contention of a perpetual Clash of Civilizations. “I would [End Page 13] love to think that we are in some way getting people to look at other people and other places, and saying it doesn’t all have to be, you know, American Velveeta cheese on white bread; there’s something else out there,” Sandra Marton insists (Marton, interview). Marton and other authors express the desire to break free from the negative stereotypes of Arabs put forth in other media via the vehicle of romance, a worthy intention indeed. In order to accomplish this goal, however, authors sometimes suppress certain aspects of Arab culture and contribute inadvertently to Orientalist discourse. Islam, for example, is the principal religion of the Middle East and North Africa, and highly misunderstood by many Americans. This religion is not necessarily off limits in romance novels, though the treatment of it by authors exists on a spectrum, one that ranges from complete omission of it to oblique or (occasionally) direct interaction with it.

In Mallery’s romances, for example, the reader experiences the complete elision of Islam as a religious force in her fictive Arab world. “I never discuss their religion at all,” notes Mallery, and then she jokingly adds of the people there that “I assume our interests don’t align” (Mallery, interview). Certainly, a not-so-close examination of her texts suggests that Christianity, not Islam, may be the dominant religion of the Middle East. As’ad, for example, the sheikh prince in The Sheikh and the Christmas Bride, is Western in his practices, drinking wine with dinner or when he needs to reflect (Mallery, Christmas 132, 197). What’s more, he marries a very devout Catholic, Kayleen James. Kayleen not only grew up in a convent, but she is considering a lifelong commitment to it when they meet. Thus, her only jewelry, besides a watch, is a pair of cross earrings and a cross necklace (Mallery, Christmas 118, 248). She insists—and As’ad allows—that Christmas is celebrated at the palace (Mallery, Christmas 143). Eventually, they will be married in a seventeenth-century cathedral in El Deharia (Mallery, Pregnant 182).
In her books, Porter embraces the challenge of creating a recognizably Islamic setting. In culture.

In equating the Middle East with the adjectives "frightening" or "toxic," this quote reflects an American conception of Islam as a catalyst for many of the ills in the Middle East, a conception actively promoted in the media. However, Porter then invites her readers to imagine a resolution premised on a mutual respect in which both protagonists manage to maintain their idea that such distinctions can be overcome:

you can't beat the readers over the head with this stuff, and you can't change a reader’s mind by preaching to them. But maybe that line will make someone think, 'Huh, I did kinda think that, but he’s just a man, yeah, a rich man and a king, but a man with feelings and just a person.' In that sense, I hope that I’m undermining the stereotypes as much as I can. Some readers won’t get that, and they’ll skim right over it. But I take very seriously the charge to make my Arab-Islamic people...people. I think that’s important (Harris, interview 28 April 2015).

Harris’s comments confirm the assertion of Teo that “whatever the representational failings of sheik romance novels, no other genre of American popular culture had determinedly and repeatedly attempted to humanize the Arab or Muslim other—even if, out of ignorance or incomprehension, imaginary Orientals had to be created in order to do so” (216). And it is noteworthy that in pursuit of this “humanizing” project, Harris has Rashid mention not only the costume element that typically signals Arab male difference in the romance genre, the “robes,” but also an ironic signifier of Islam to many Americans, the veil.

In a group interview I conducted with several sheik romance authors, the veil was a particularly lively topic, taking up more than ten minutes of the conversation. The wearing of Islamic dress means many things and takes many forms in different countries in which Islam is a presence. Sometimes, it can appear as a result of state-sponsored dress codes, as in Iran; elsewhere it emerges as a result of grassroots activism against the government, as in Egypt or Tunisia. American romance authors are likewise divided—sometimes self-divided—when they discuss the topic. Some authors do not like the idea of women wearing what they see as an uncomfortable piece of clothing in order to achieve what they consider to be an outdated form of modesty. Others are more conflicted. Marton, for example, lives in a northeastern university town where the men wear robes and the women are veiled, that I must surely be less civilized than you?” (42) Harris asserts that "I love that particular line," and then she notes that:

Unlike Marton, Porter sees defending women’s right to dress as they see fit as an unambiguously “feminist” stance (Porter, interview). We like something that isn’t our neighbor next door because you can suspend your disbelief. It’s almost like Disney for adults because at the end of the story the foreign and the exotic and the frightening aspects are rendered, you know the toxic poisonous aspects, are rendered tame. You know the things that might be evil or bad just become good and accepting. You know the East and the West coincide an identity, you know, in my books it’s not that the East is subjugated but that the East and the West find peace and that both cultures are respected and that we are drawn to the opposite. So for me personally, I think that is the fantasy element... (Porter, interview 18 July 2013).

In her books, Porter embraces the challenge of creating a recognizably Islamic setting. InThe Sheikh’s Chosen Queen, for
example, she imagines a place—the fictive Sarq, located next to the United Arab Emirates—where 90 per cent of the population is Muslim (Porter, Chosen 65). There, Sharif Fehr rules. He is an autocrat described as “one of the most powerful leaders in the Middle East” (Porter, Chosen 13). Sharif, however, is confounded by his new role as guardian to his deceased cousin’s children, so he invites schoolteacher Jesslyn Heaton to take charge of them. The two had once dated in England, but Jesslyn finds now that “his baggy sweatshirts were gone, and the faded, torn jeans were replaced by a dishdasha or a thoub, as more commonly known in the Arabian Gulf, a cool, long, one-piece white dress and the traditional head gear comprised of a gutrah, a white scarflike cloth, and the oqal, the black circular band that held everything together” (Porter, Chosen 10). Sharif harbors anger towards Jesslyn for breaking up with him without explanation many years ago, but Jesslyn refuses, until the very end, to admit that her infertility made her feel unworthy of wedding the crown prince. Ultimately, the explicitly Muslim sheikh marries the explicitly Christian commoner, and Jesslyn is happy to learn that “Sharif had incorporated elements from both their faiths in the service.” A similar “incorporation” of East and West is implied for the future of the country, as Jesslyn afterward assists in setting up an American School in Sarq. “Education,” this main character notes, “was one of the best ways to touch and improve the world” (Porter, Chosen 173-174).

Conclusion

With its explicit images and arousing fantasies in which Arabs and Americans ultimately live together in peace, the sheikh romance novel can be read as a form of socio-political erotica. By the end of each book, the American heroine always decides to live in the Arab world, while the sheikh unservingly embraces the political and social values of his Western bride. Read skeptically, against the grain, these novels present a fantasy in which autocratic leaders of the Arab world—those sheikishly heroes who love American women—embrace the values of their Western fiancées and wives, reconciling their two cultures in a way that secures and privileges American interests. But read more generously, in light of their authors’ intentions, the sheikh romance novel does present a hopeful vision of the world, one which exchanges Huntington’s vision of a Clash of Civilizations for a world in which the clash between individuals from two worlds, now at odds, is ultimately an erotic clash: one which leads them to fall in love, resolve their differences, and live harmoniously together. For many of the authors interviewed for this study, reconciliation offered through romantic love is a microcosm of the broader attitudinal change they would like to foster. “I think it would be lovely for us as a culture to begin to stop being so afraid of North Africa and all the people and the men and the women and the children,” Porter says, speaking for many of her colleagues. “It’s hard with the current political situation, which is why I think that the fantasies of the stories are important and allow us still to have a relationship with a part of the world that the media can make very frightening to us” (Porter, interview 1 May 2014).

Set in fictional kingdoms, filled with romance and politics, sheikh romances serve as the perfect vehicle to assuage American fears—anxieties found both in readers and in authors—regarding Arabs and their world.

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I hope all of you are having a wonderful Christmas and Holiday Season! I just wanted to post and let Everyone, including my new followers, know that I have, not one but two, books on special! The Narrative of Benjamin White (http://a.co/d/8XCDq22) is Free through this Saturday 12/29! Second Chances (http://a.co/d/a7GILvY) will be available for 99 cents until close to Midnight 12/29! Just wanted to post and let Everyone know. I know I have sent invites to all but the new followers. I also want to let everyone know that received the same message in response to your responses, the user has been b With concept and photography by Alyssa Ryan Photography and floral design by Moelleux Events — today’s romantic Bohemian inspired wedding shoot has all of our faves included: A groom with suspenders, a desert landscape with cacti galore, and a wedding cake that will leave you feeling oh-so inspired! Oh, and did we mention the plethora of big, beautiful blooms we’re seeing here? From the photographer, ’It’s always been a photographic goal of mine since the beginning of 2017 to create my own styled shoot. How hard could that be, I thought?’ Mad props to all of you amazing coor Posts Tagged ‘desert’. 1 result. Desert Signal. by Kristian on November 30, 2018 at 00:00. Posted In: Comic. Here is a crazy fact: Tomorrow, December 1st, 2018 – Optipess.com will be 10 years old! Thanks for everyone who has read the comic over the years. Here’s to the next 10!* * Unless humanity gets wiped out by an extinction level event before then, in which case Optipess probably will be cancelled and/or go […]