

“More Sheiks than the Sahara”: America’s Romance with Arab Sheiks, 1830-1930

by

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ABSTRACT

The Arab sheik has long been an icon of fascination in American culture. “More Sheiks than the Sahara” traces the historical roots and evolution of this interest in the United States from the 1830s through the 1920s. Utilizing a broad range of source materials, including literature, poetry, film, music, art, and print journalism, this dissertation uncovers the significance of the Arab sheik to contemporaneous understandings of race, gender, and class in nineteenth and early-twentieth century America. Broadly, I argue that meanings about the Arab sheik were not only varied, dynamic, and often contradictory but also that these meanings operated as powerful symbols around which a diverse cast of American men and women negotiated the cultural, social, political, and economic forces that shaped their lives in the century spanning 1830-1930. Whereas other scholarship has long emphasized the role of the exotic Arab sheik in fostering new and taboo expressions of white female desire, particularly in the 1920s, “More Sheiks than the Sahara” gives voice to those Americans whose relationships with this cultural icon have been given less attention. In addition to white women, this dissertation uncovers the ways in which the Arab sheik would play a significant role in the politics, cultural practices, and identity formations of Anglo American males, Arab Americans, and African Americans throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

INTRODUCTION

In 1919, an unpublished author by the name of Edith Maude Hull completed her first novel, *The Sheik*. Set in the deserts of Algeria, Hull's narrative of adventure and romance tells the story of Sheik Ahmed Ben Hasan, the barbaric tribal leader of a band of roaming Bedouin Arabs, and Diana Mayo, an independent and assertive British woman who travels to North Africa in hopes of gaining emancipation from the prescribed gender norms of genteel society. Diana is convinced she can never love, while Ahmed, who abducts this free-spirited woman early in her desert sojourn, is determined to break her into submission like one of his prized Arabian steeds. Over the course of the novel, however, the two gradually fall in love, and Ahmed learns tenderness while Diana, in her own way, accepts her social duty to find a husband.

The Sheik proved to be a wildly popular novel with female readers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Diana's struggle for personal autonomy against the pressures of traditional social conventions would have spoken to many during an age in which British and American women were fighting for greater political and economic privileges. Moreover, *The Sheik* openly addressed the taboo subject of female sexual desire, granting its readers license to explore their sexuality in ways not typically encouraged in British and American literature of the time. It was in regards to this latter theme that Hull's romance novel was most controversial. Despite the ultimate revelation that Ahmed is, in actuality, a white man disguised as an Arab, readers were led to believe for most of the novel that Diana was lusting for and falling in love with an Arab man. For many critics, *The Sheik's* titillating narrative of desert adventure and interracial

romance brushed too freely against the social and legal conventions that stigmatized and criminalized miscegenation in Great Britain and the U.S.

So popular was this exotic and controversial tale of interracial romance, that two years after its publication it was made into a major Hollywood motion picture, starring Italian immigrant actor, Rudolph Valentino, who was by this point gaining a reputation as a silent-screen heartthrob. In the U.S., the allure and controversy surrounding the novel was amplified as it now reached an even larger audience. While women flocked to the theaters to see Valentino take on the role of the dark and forbidden lover they knew from Hull's novel, many white men mobilized around their hatred of the novel, the film, and, more broadly Valentino. This gendered dichotomy was captured well in a 1926 cartoon from the fan magazine *Motion Picture Classic*. The cartoon features patrons in a movie theater watching as a dark-skinned Arab sheik abducts a limp and helpless white woman. The caption reads: "The Nordic sneered at Valentino while his women folk thrilled to this jungle python of a lover."¹

As the cartoon in *Motion Picture Classic* suggests, the popular press and Hollywood trade journals of the 1920s would have us believe that all white women adored Valentino and fantasized about romantic encounters with exotic desert sheiks, while all white men vehemently opposed the "sheikmania" that seemed to be sweeping across the U.S. The demographics of Valentino's audiences and *The Sheik's* readership were, as I and others demonstrate, more complex than this gendered and racialized dichotomy suggests. Nonetheless, the sheer repetition of it in popular reviews of the novel and film, points towards the powerful ways that *The Sheik* had upset deeply held beliefs around race, gender, and sexuality in the U.S.

¹ Don Ryan, "Has the Great Lover Become Just a Celebrity?" *Motion Picture Classic* (May 1926), 69.

Central to the narrative of this popular but controversial desert romance was the character of the Arab sheik; that white-robed, desert-dwelling, forbidden lover with a penchant for capturing white women who, sooner or later, fall for his charms. In Arabic, the word *sheikh* (pronounced like the English word *shake*) translates to English as *ruler* or *leader*.² It is a title often reserved for religious and political leaders as well as honored members of a community, the head of a family, or the tribal chieftain of the nomadic Bedouin Arabs of the Saharan and Arabian deserts.³ By the 1920s, the word had been Anglicized to *sheik* and was often pronounced like the French word *chic*.⁴ The sheik of American popular culture was, as we have already seen, romanticized as a mysterious and alluring object of female desire. If a bit rough in his methods, he was oftentimes the only man who could truly awaken the romantic side of a woman, stirring in her a deeply suppressed passion which she did not know existed inside. The Arab sheik of novel and film was racialized as exotic, barbaric, and dark, even though he was oftentimes simply a white man in disguise.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the controversy surrounding Hull's novel and its cinematic adaptation, Hollywood filmmakers rushed to produce more films like *The Sheik*. Between 1921-1929, the American film market was saturated with desert romance films, such as: *Arabian Love* (1922), *Burning Sands* (1922), *One Stolen Night* (1923), *The Arab* (1924), *A Son of the Sahara* (1924), and *The Desert Song* (1929) to name only a few. In 1926, Rudolph

² "Sheik," *Cambridge Arabic-English Dictionary* (2018), <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/> (accessed July 28, 2018).

³ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies and People* (2001), updated edition (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2000), 25 and Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 1.

⁴ Evidence for this vernacular pronunciation exists in the recorded music from the period in which the word *sheik* is clearly pronounced like *chic*. Moreover, both Arab American author, Ameen Rihani, as well as Rex Ingram, who directed *The Arab* in 1924, were compelled in the 1920s to offer statements instructing Americans on the correct pronunciation of the word. See: Harry Ruby, et. al., "The Sheik of Avenue B," musical recording (Camden, NJ: Victor, 1922), <https://loc.gov> (accessed July 30, 2018); Ameen Rihani, "Deserts of Fact and Fancy," *Syrian World* (December 1929), 7; and Herbert Howe, "Sheiks Have Inhibitions: Popular Raconteur Tells of Adventures in the Sahara During Making of 'The Arab,'" *Los Angeles Times* (February 17, 1924): B11.

Valentino appeared again in *Son of the Sheik*, a cinematic adaptation of E. M. Hull's sequel to *The Sheik*. A number of films, like *The Shriek of Araby* (1923), *Souls for Sale* (1923), and *She's a Sheik* (1927), began to humorously spoof the genre as early as 1923. Moreover, almost immediately following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921, the word itself took on a new vernacular meaning that seemingly had little to do with its Arabic origins. A sheik, in the parlance of the 1920s, could also refer to a man who was suave, sophisticated, good-looking, well-attuned to his appearances, devious, and/or sexually liberal, all qualities that were often ascribed to Valentino. In short, the word *sheik* was used to describe the male equivalent to that iconic stereotype of the decadent and socially devious Jazz Age: the female flapper. For many Americans in the 1920s, then, a sheik was just as likely to be found sporting a three-piece suit or dancing on the floor of the hottest urban jazz club as he was to be seen riding on horseback through the desert, white robes flowing in the wind.

The 1920s were, as one scholar has recently described the period, very much a decade of "sheik fever."⁵ Love him or hate him, the figure of the sheik was everywhere in American popular culture. As Fritz Tidden of *Motion Picture Magazine* noted in 1922, "There seem to be more sheiks around now than you can shake a stick at."⁶ A year later, Herbert Howe would echo this sentiment in *Photoplay*, declaring there to be "more sheiks in Hollywood than Sahara."⁷ The sense that the Arab sheik was everywhere in American popular culture of the 1920s also came across in the 1923 spoof film, *Souls for Sale*. As a desert caravan makes its way across the screen in an early scene from the movie, a title card humorously informs the audience that the "usual sheik crosses the usual desert with the usual captive." The sheer presence of this icon in

⁵ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 1

⁶ Fritz Tidden, "The Sheik of Araby," Film Review, *Moving Picture World* (May 13, 1922), 196.

⁷ Herbert Howe, "Sheiks of Hollywood," *Photoplay* (September 1923): 58.

American culture raises a number of questions. What was it about the Arab sheik that so captivated Americans throughout the 1920s and before? How did Americans come to re-contextualize the meaning of this honorary Arabic title to the point that it denoted an easily-recognizable and incredibly controversial sex symbol? Finally, Why did the word *sheik* take on a new vernacular meaning in the 1920s that had seemingly nothing to do with Arabs or the desert?

In general, my dissertation, which borrows its title from Herbert Howe's comment in *Photoplay*, seeks to answer these questions, tracing the cultural history of the Arab sheik in American culture from the mid-nineteenth century through the late 1920s. Throughout my work, I acknowledge the historical significance of Hull and Valentino's renditions of *The Sheik* in shaping American cultural understandings of this iconic Arab figure. However, "More Sheiks than the Sahara" also goes beyond the purview of 1920s sheikmania, highlighting the ways in which this short-lived cultural fad was rooted in and grew from a variety of nuanced historical contexts that spanned the course of the preceding century. For instance, I locate the historical roots of American sheikmania not in the pages of imported British romance novels of the early twentieth century, nor in Hollywood's adaptations of these works, but rather in the writings, paintings, and travelogues of mid-nineteenth century white American males. The historical irony should not be lost on us here, because it was this very demographic of men who were, less than a century later, some of the most vocal opponents of the sheikmania that proliferated American culture. Moreover, my research uncovers the ways that the Arab sheik was significant as a cultural icon to more than just white American men and women. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both African Americans and Arab Americans utilized the image and significance of the sheik to carve out meaning in their own lives. This was, however, more than just a passive reappropriation of the dominant cultural understandings of the Arab sheik that

proliferated in American culture. Though there were certainly instances of such reappropriation and, as one might expect, resistance to these dominant understandings, which were often rooted in racist ideologies, I argue that both African Americans and Arab Americans also played an integral part in determining the broader significance that the sheik would have in American culture at large. Throughout my dissertation, I demonstrate how the meanings and significance attached to this cultural icon changed through time and varied depending on the contexts in which they circulated. Broadly, I argue that meanings about the Arab sheik in American culture were not only varied, dynamic, and often contradictory, but also that the Arab sheik operated as a powerful symbol around which a diverse cast of American men and women negotiated the cultural, social, political, and economic forces that shaped their lives in the period spanning 1830-1930.

Historicizing Orientalism: A Brief Note on My Methodological Approach

As with most academic studies concerned with representations of Arabs, Islam, and, what today many refer to as, the Middle East, my dissertation is indebted to Edward W. Said's canonical work, *Orientalism* (1978). Throughout his research, Said establishes that Orientalism was and, to a large degree, still is a mode of knowledge production, whereby the "West" produces authoritative (though by no means objective) statements and images about the "East" or the "Orient." Said demonstrates the intricate connection between politics, representations, and power, exploring the ways in which these Orientalist images and ideas became an ingrained and highly influential way of understanding the region for Great Britain, France, and the U.S.

Modern Orientalism, as Said establishes, began to manifest in the context of nineteenth century British and French colonialism. It was at the turn of the century that both European empires expanded dramatically, establishing a presence in North Africa and West Asia,

competing with and often supplanting local and regional powers with previously-established claims to the area. This is not to argue that Orientalism just popped up out of nowhere the moment that Napoleon Bonaparte attempted to colonize Egypt between 1798-1801. It most definitely drew upon much longer historical traditions of European encounters with the region dating as far back as the Classical Period. However, increasingly throughout the nineteenth century, modern Orientalism was very much informed by Britain and France's growing power and influence as empires that would come to dominate North African and West Asia, among other areas of the globe.

Encounters with the peoples, cultures, and geographies of the Orient, coupled with the increasing responsibilities and burdens of colonization, laid the groundwork in which modern Orientalism would evolve. Academics, novelists, poets, artist, travelers, and colonial agents alike produced a web of interconnected meanings, stock images, and authoritative knowledge about the region and its inhabitants that would increasingly define the areciprocal relationship of power that existed between East and West. As a discourse, Orientalism produced a number of binary oppositions that often tell us as much about how these Europeans thought of themselves as it does about their understanding of the region. It is a truism of Orientalism, for instance, that the East is barbaric and savage, whereas the West is civilized and cultured. The East was often gendered as feminine and passive. Conversely, the West was masculine and active. The list of binaries goes on: backward verses progressive, emotional verses irrational, exotic verses familiar, heathen verses Christian, to name only a few examples. Even the ability to label vast and diverse swaths of territory as "Western" or "Eastern" – terms we still use to this day – points towards the power to label and define embedded in the mobilization of Orientalism.

Despite having little imperial interest in the region until 1945, Orientalism was also very much a part of the cultural fabric of the U.S. since its founding as a nation. As a cultural symbol, the East was often romanticized in the U.S. as an exotic space of sensuous and sexual delight as well as opulent and lavish abundance. With a reputation centered around sex and pleasure, Orientalism would find a welcome home in the emerging mass entertainment and advertisement industries of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In the U.S., it was mobilized to sell everything from cigarettes to clothing and entertained Americans at venues such as vaudeville and motion picture theaters, circuses and other traveling shows, as well as the World's Fairs. Furthermore, Orientalism was often mobilized as a discourse through which Americans could negotiate and shore up domestic understandings of race and identity. Like its European counterpart, American Orientalism, while not always derogatory towards Arabs, Islam, or the Middle East, was very much situated within a racial schema that privileged whiteness.⁸

It is an academic truism by now, however, that both European and American Orientalism have been far more heterogeneous than Said originally theorized. The dichotomies between “East” and “West” so central to Orientalist discourse, for instance, were often marked with contradiction and were never always agreed upon by adherents of Orientalism. Said's account of Orientalism, moreover, very much privileged the vantage of elite white men, giving us little sense of how women, people of color, or the middle and working classes produced meanings about the region and its peoples. Finally, Said's work does not account for the ways in which the

⁸ The body of academic work on American Orientalism in the period preceding the end of the Second World War is far too voluminous to cite in full. For some examples, however, see: Fuad Sha'ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of Orientalism in America* (Durham: The Acorn Press, 1991); Holly Edwards, ed., *Nobel Dreams – Wicket Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Amira Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood: The Cultural Mythology of Veils, Harems, and Belly Dancers in the U.S.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

racialized subjects of Orientalism—Arabs, Turks, Muslims, South and East Asians, among others—have historically responded to this discourse which purports to speak for them.⁹ Despite these limitations, I still find the term “Orientalism” to be quite useful. Throughout my dissertation, I deploy it as a way to signal a set of diverse and varied cultural relationships to the territories, peoples, cultures, and things deemed Oriental. This is not to argue that there is no room for Said’s original definition of Orientalism in my own research, as there are most definitely instances where American understandings of the figure of the Arab sheik fit within this more traditional paradigm. However, it is better to think of Said’s definition as one of a constellation of meanings produced about the region. And while certain modes of Orientalism may present themselves as more dominant in any given historical period, we should not look past the myriad ways that personal and social identity markers related to race, class, gender, and personality, among others not considered here, impact one’s relationship to Orientalism, producing meanings about the region and its peoples that are, as one scholar has phrased it, “as various as [the] individuals and circumstances” in which they are produced and consumed.¹⁰ By contextualizing and historicizing the diverse ways in which the figure of the Arab sheik took on significance to a variety of Americans in the century spanning 1830-1930, we can continue to uncover the nuanced and often contradictory manifestations of Orientalism in American culture.

⁹ In addition to Edwards’ *Noble Dreams – Wicked Pleasures* and Nance’s *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, the following works offer examples of productive and critical revisions to Said’s thesis: Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: British and French Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (2001), updated edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America’s Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); and Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹⁰ Holly Edwards, “A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930,” in *Noble Dreams – Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930*, edited by Holly Edwards, 10-57 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

My own methodological approach to understanding American relationships to the figure of the Arab sheik, therefore, is one that situates cultural production and consumption within specific historical and social contexts, illuminating the varied meanings produced about this cultural icon between 1830-1930. In order to do this, we will have to consider the historical factors influencing American manifestations of Orientalism in this period. In some cases, however, it will also be necessary to abandon Orientalism as an explanatory paradigm. This will be an especially pertinent approach in my fourth chapter, which, in part, looks at the ways the word *sheik* took on new linguistic and cultural meanings that had more to do with the burgeoning urban jazz cultures of the 1920s than with the exotic and far-off East. I situate my research, therefore, within a variety of historical and social contexts spanning the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, some of which at first glance might not be self-evident. These include not only U.S. understandings of the Arab world and European imperialism but also: changing domestic ideas about race, gender, and sexuality; debates surrounding national identity and assimilation, particularly as they relate to immigration and internal migration; industrialization as well as the birth of consumer capitalism and modern forms of advertising; the evolution of the American entertainment industry and the literary history of the romance novel; as well as urbanization and the accompanying panic over urban crime. As I demonstrated throughout “More Sheiks than the Sahara,” all these historical factors would contribute to the production and evolution of a diverse set of ideas about the Arab sheik in the century-long period under consideration.

***The Sheik*: A Narrative Overview**

The best place to begin our inquiry into the significance of the Arab sheik in American culture is by looking at the plot and historical significance of E. M. Hull and Rudolph Valentino's renditions of *The Sheik*. While it is a major aim of this project to place these works within a much longer historical trajectory, the fact remains that most academic studies of this topic either focus solely upon Hull and Valentino or give them serious weight as sources of historical inquiry. And rightly so. Both novel and film were immensely popular and controversial sources of entertainment in the U.S. that spoke to and influenced cultural trends and broader social debates about race, gender, and sexuality in the 1920s. Because of the centrality of *The Sheik* to this dissertation's subject matter and the academic literature upon which my research is based, I have decided to include a rather lengthy overview of the general plot to both novel and film. This decision should aid readers with little to no prior knowledge of *The Sheik* and better contrast the scholarly interventions I am making throughout the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

E. M. Hull was born Edith Maude Henderson in 1880. The daughter of a New York ship owner, she traveled throughout her childhood before settling down in Derbyshire, England in the early 1900s with her husband, Percy Winstanley Hull. When World War I broke out in Europe, Percy joined the British armed forces, leaving his wife alone in the rural and isolated English countryside. It was partially out of boredom and worry that Hull turned to writing in her husband's absence. Drawing upon her childhood memories of Algeria, she began and completed her debut novel, *The Sheik*, which was published in London in 1919. Two years later, it traveled across the Atlantic Ocean, reaching North American readers in 1921. While *The Sheik* was

immensely popular with women readers in Britain and the U.S., it also garnered serious criticism for its overt dealing with topics related to female sexuality and miscegenation.¹¹

The same year *The Sheik* was making its North American debut, a young, up-and-coming Italian immigrant film actor named Rudolph Valentino walked into the California office of Hollywood mogul Jesse L. Lasky. Hot from the success of Metro Pictures' sensational *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), Valentino had finally proven his merit as an exotic romantic lead after years of being cast in minor bit parts or as a swarthy ethnic villain. Valentino hoped that the production company Famous Players-Lasky might respect him enough to offer better promotion and better pay than Metro had. On the advice of his secretary, Lasky offered Valentino the part of Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan, the leading role of director George Melford's adaptation of the controversial British romance novel that was sweeping the nation. After consulting with his agents, Valentino promptly signed a contract with Famous Players-Lasky. When Paramount Pictures distributed Melford's cinematic adaptation of *The Sheik* to theaters across America, the popular story, which had proved so controversial, now reached an even wider audience, drawing in massive profits while also intensifying the national conversation about the moral and social implications of Hull's exotic tale of interracial romance.¹²

While the novel and film differ on some accounts, the general plot of both versions of *The Sheik* follows a similar story arch.¹³ Ahmed Ben Hassan (Valentino), a desert Arab chieftain who sternly commands the admiration and respect of his tribe, is smitten with an adventurous, independent, and assertive British woman named Diana Mayo (Agnes Ayers). The plot begins in the Algerian city of Biskra, where Diana, against the wishes of her brother and travel companion,

¹¹ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 88, 94, and 109.

¹² Emily W. Leider, *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 148-153.

¹³ For a full discussion of these differences, see: Teo, *Desert Passions*, 124-131.

Sir Aubrey Mayo (Frank Butler), plans to venture into the desert with a native Arab guide. Diana's adventure quickly turns into a nightmare when she is abducted by a tribe of roving Bedouin Arabs whose leader turns out to be none other than Sheik Ahmed.

From their first encounter, Diana is both fearful of Ahmed but also drawn to this dangerously sexy chieftain who is unlike the much more reserved men of the British upper crust to whom she is accustomed. Diana steals glances at his face, which was "brown [and] clean-shaven ... surmounted by crisp, close-cut brown hair." "It was," to reassert the duality of emotions Diana feels for this man, "the handsomest and cruellest [*sic.*] face she had ever seen." Ahmed, too, gazes upon his captive, his glances filled with a lust and passion that readily suggests the fate that will soon fall upon Diana. The Sheik hungrily devours her beauty with "fierce burning eyes," figuratively undressing her and "leaving the beautiful white body bare under his passionate stare."¹⁴ In the film, Ahmed's menacing stare is accentuated by close ups of Valentino's over-exaggerated facial expressions, which suggest his desire to rape Diana.

The handling of rape is perhaps one of the major differences between the novel and the film. While Hull explicitly makes clear in the novel that Ahmed does indeed rape Diana, the film is much more ambiguous about the topic. In either case, Diana is still the captive of a misogynistic Arab man "to whom the feelings of a woman were non-existent."¹⁵ In addition to the rape, Diana is initially confined to Ahmed's tent and forced to wear Arab clothing in front of the sheik's European guests, which she finds utterly humiliating. Diana had gone to the desert to find greater freedom and autonomy from strict patriarchal gender norms, only to find herself again subject to such codes in ways more terrifying than she could ever have imagined.

¹⁴ Edith Maude Hull, *The Sheik* (1919/1921) (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 46.

¹⁵ Hull, *The Sheik*, 71.

To pass time during her confinement, Diana begins to observe the daily lives of Ahmed and his followers, occasionally catching glimpses that suggest the sheik is not as tyrannical as he lets on at first. Slowly, a mutual trust is built between captor and captive, and Ahmed eventually allows Diana to go out into the desert accompanied by his French servant, Gaston (Lucien Littlefield). Knowing an opportunity when she sees it, Diana attempts to escape during one of her chaperoned desert horseback rides but is caught in the flurry of an unexpected sandstorm. Ahmed immediately comes to her rescue and it is on their ride back to camp that an exhausted Diana explores the attraction she has begun to feel for her captor:

She was drooping wearily, unable to sit upright any longer, and once or twice she jolted heavily against the man who rode behind her. His nearness had ceased to revolt her; she thought of it with a dull feeling of wonder. She had even a sense of relief at the thought of the strength so close to her. Her eyes rested on his hands, showing brown and muscular under the folds of his white robes. She knew the power of the long, lean fingers that could, when he liked, be gentle enough.¹⁶

Following her return to camp, Diana dwells upon these confusing and unexpected feelings.

“What was the matter with her,” she wonders? “Why did she not shrink from the pressure of his arm and the contact of his warm, strong body? What had happened to her?” Diana immediately answers her own question: “Quite suddenly she knew—knew that she loved him, that she had loved him for a long time, even when she thought she hated him and when she had fled from him.”¹⁷

Diana’s realization of love for Ahmed is doubly surprising not only because this was the man who had captured and raped her but also because he was of a different race than her. The subject of miscegenation and interracial romance is a central topic that I explore throughout this dissertation and one that was also addressed quite explicitly in *The Sheik*. For instance, while

¹⁶ Hull, *The Sheik*, 100.

¹⁷ Hull, *The Sheik*, 101.

silently confessing her love for Ahmed to herself on the night of her rescue from the sandstorm, Diana expounds upon the racial divide between her and the sheik:

And he was an Arab! A man of different race and colour, a native; Aubrey would indiscriminately class him as a ‘damned nigger.’ She did not care. It made no difference... She did not care if he was an Arab, she did not care what he was, he was the man she loved.¹⁸

Despite Diana’s expressed indifference to Ahmed’s racial identity, it is precisely because of his racial background that she allows herself to love for the first time in her life. Prior to meeting the sheik, British men had all but ensured that Diana would never find love. They were either too effete, such as the high society man whom she quickly discards at a social gathering in the beginning of the film, or they are too dismissive of her femininity, such as Aubrey, who encourages his sister to follow manly pursuits like travelling and hunting (so long as this was done at his side and not independently). Ahmed was unlike any of the men she had encountered before, “a lawless savage who had taken her to satisfy a passing fancy and who had treated her with merciless cruelty.” And it was precisely because of his “brutality and superb animal strength” that she loved him.¹⁹ The sheik, with his foreign but virile masculinity, had awakened in her the “womanly instincts that under Aubrey’s training had been suppressed and undeveloped.”²⁰ Unlike Ahmed, the “men who had loved her [before] had not had the power to touch her.”²¹ According to *The Sheik*, a woman who was indifferent to the advances of men and often thought of herself as their equal, needed to be strong-armed into love; literally raped into feeling something for the opposite sex. Only Ahmed could stir in her the feelings of passion and love that she had ignored for so long, awakening in Diana her true purpose as a woman.

¹⁸ Hull, *The Sheik*, 101.

¹⁹ Hull, *The Sheik*, 101.

²⁰ Hull, *The Sheik*, 142.

²¹ Hull, *The Sheik*, 101.

Now mindful of her subordination and afraid that Ahmed might abandon her should she confess the truth, Diana suffers silently, waiting for the day when the sheik might take the initiative and reveal his own feelings towards his British captive. Before that day arrives, however, Diana is abducted by Sheik Ibrahim Omair (Walter Long), Ahmed's primary rival. Diana is imprisoned in Omair's desert stronghold where, again, she is threatened with rape. With his "bloated, vicious face and gross, unwieldy body," Ibrahim offers a repugnant foil to Ahmed.²² Even Ahmed's fierce gaze, with which he had figuratively raped Diana early in her captivity, was no match to the terror with which Ibrahim could inflict with his "deep-set, bloodshot eyes."²³ Learning of Diana's capture, Ahmed gathers his men and launches an assault upon his rival's desert palisade. While Ahmed defeats Omair in hand-to-hand combat, rescuing Diana, he is gravely injured in the process and nearly dies. Back in his tent, the sheik lies asleep, recovering from his wounds. Diana, clutching his hands, sits in waiting at Ahmed's side where she finally professes her love to him in the presence of the sheik's lifelong friend, Raoul de Saint Hubert (Adolphe Menjou). It is while lying in wait, that Diana notices an anomaly with Ahmed. "His hand is so large for an Arab," she infamously notes in the film. Raoul, then, informs Diana that Ahmed is not really an Arab, but rather the orphaned child of a British father and Spanish mother. He was raised in the wilds of the desert by Ahmed Ben Hassan, Senior and subsequently educated in France before returning to assume leadership of the tribe following his adopted father's death.

The revelation of Ahmed's true racial identity, which will be discussed in more detail below, finally quells the threat of miscegenation that underlies the entire plot of *The Sheik*. It is in this scene that the film version ends. Diana, kneeling at the bedside of Ahmed, who is no

²² Hull, *The Sheik*, 152.

²³ Hull, *The Sheik*, 161.

longer in his Arab robes, kisses the hand she is fervently clutching and rests her head upon the sheik's chest. "Diana, my beloved," utters Ahmed! "The darkness has passed and now the sunshine." Given the film's explicit engagement with issues of race, the emphasis on this transition from "darkness" to "sunshine" was surely meant to be read as an allusion to the racial transformation that Ahmed undergoes throughout *The Sheik*, a point that is further accentuated by the symbolic gesture of changing his style of clothing. Hull concludes her novel in a similar manner when she notes that Ahmed has traded his traditional Arab garb for British attire. When the sheik finally confesses his love for Diana, he is "divested of the flowing robes that had seemed essentially a part of him." Rather, he is seen wearing a "silk shirt, riding breeches and high brown boots ... A thin tweed coat lay in a heap on the carpet."²⁴ By the end of both novel and film, Ahmed is finally white enough for Ahmed and Diana to act upon their love for one another. *The Sheik*, therefore, finds narrative closure in the revelation of Ahmed's true racial identity.

A number of themes are consistently present throughout *The Sheik*. Both the novel and film, for instance, portray North Africa as a place of exotic wonder and barbaric terror in need of white European rule, tying into the broader tropes of Orientalism discussed earlier. At other times, however, the boundaries enforcing traditional understandings of gender and race, which were central to Orientalism, are not always clearly demarcated. The desert offers an environment where privileged white Europeans indulge in odysseys of self-discovery and self-fashioning, constructing for themselves hybrid identities that are not-quite-European and not-quite-Oriental.²⁵ Diana, for instance, ventures into the desert to escape traditional Victorian gender

²⁴ Hull, *The Sheik*, 207.

²⁵ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 166-170.

norms that would have here tethered as a piece of property to her guardian-brother, Aubrey, until he could find a suitable husband for her. While Diana ultimately consents to her womanly duties of marriage and, by *The Sheik's* sequel, child-rearing, her choice of husband, ultimately, falls far outside traditional British social conventions. Ahmed, too, finds his true self in the desert, where he “plays Arab” by leading a tribe of nomadic Bedouin despite his European biological pedigree.²⁶ By concealing the truth of Ahmed’s racial background for nearly the entire plot, *The Sheik* accentuates both the anxiety or exhilaration that many readers and spectators would have felt about the prospect of a white woman falling in love and desiring to have sex with an Arab man. Hull expresses this emotional dichotomy in her exploration of Diana’s newfound love for Ahmed:

A year ago, a few weeks even, she would have shuddered with repulsion at the bare idea, the thought that a native could even touch her had been revolting, but all that was swept away and was nothing in the face of the love that filled her heart so completely.²⁷

And while Ahmed is, ultimately, revealed as the son of a British father and Spanish mother, a plot twist that quells the threat of miscegenation posed by his and Diana’s romance, the novel, on several occasions, leaves open the question of Ahmed’s whiteness. For instance, when Raoul Saint Hubert reveals to Diana Ahmed’s racial pedigree, he throws in an aside about the sheik’s maternal Spanish side of the family. “[M]any of the old noble Spanish families have Moorish blood in their veins,” notes Raoul, “the characteristics crop up even after centuries. It is so with Ahmed, and his life in the desert has accentuated it.”²⁸ In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was quite common for Europeans and Americans to understand race as being

²⁶ Like Nance (2009), I borrow this notion from Philip J. Deloria’s concept of “playing Indian.” See: Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: CT, 1998).

²⁷ Hull, *The Sheik*, 101.

²⁸ Hull, *The Sheik*, 179.

determined by one of two factors. Some held that it was biologically determined, passed on through sexual reproduction. While others conceptualized race as being environmentally determined, influenced and molded by climate and geography. *The Sheik* strikes a balance between these two prevailing ideas of race, presenting Ahmed as a European with a latent biological pedigree rooted in his Moorish blood, which is then made manifest by his time in the desert. This is perhaps why, despite knowing his true racial identity by the end of the novel, Diana continues to insist that she will always think of Ahmed as an Arab. Hull notes how Diana “could not think of him as an Englishman. The mere accident of his parentage was a factor that weighed nothing. He was and always would be an Arab of the wilderness.”²⁹

The Sheik, therefore, engaged in a variety of competing tropes related to race, gender, sex, and European empire. The popularity of both novel and film in British and American culture, not to mention the controversy surrounding their reception, raises a number of questions. Why, for instance, did *The Sheik* have such a large female following? This question, in particular, is especially pertinent considering that this was a narrative in which an independent and rebellious white woman is ostensibly raped into submission by her pseudo-Arab captor, and, on top of it all, she falls in the love with the man. Moreover, we might ask, what was it about this British novel, full of European characters and imperialist intrigue, that spoke so strongly to American readers who had no real imperial holding in the region at that point in time? Furthermore, how was Ahmed’s ambiguous racial identity understood by Americans in the period contemporary to *The Sheik*’s release. Additionally, what impact, if any, did the novel’s adaptation to film and casting of Rudolph Valentino to play Ahmed alter the conditions of *The Sheik*’s reception in the U.S.? Finally, how have other scholars interpreted and historically

²⁹ Hull, *The Sheik*, 189.

contextualized both novel and film and in what ways have they attempted to go beyond *The Sheik* in their studies of 1920s sheikmania?

An Overview of the Academic Literature Concerning *The Sheik*

In her recent work, *Desert Passions* (2012), Hsu-Ming Teo notes that, in the 1970s and 1980s, early feminist scholars working in the field of Romance Novel Studies generally interpreted *The Sheik* in ways that were, on some accounts, strikingly similar to the reactions that many conservative bourgeois social guardians had to the novel in the 1920s. Both camps, for instance, would have agreed in their conclusion that *The Sheik* was nothing more than pornographic, trash literature. Many of these earliest feminist interpretations, however, also condemned the novel for its patriarchal overtones, which reinscribed marriage as the only option for a woman and rewarded Ahmed for his rape of Diana, an interpretation that was, obviously, less prevalent in the 1920s. It was not until the 1980s and after that a new wave of academic literature within Romance Novel Studies began to consider seriously the ways in which romance literature may have spoken to women historically. *The Sheik*, after all, was written by and for women. The rate at which women on both sides of the Atlantic consumed the novel and purchased tickets to witness its cinematic adaptation suggests that its plot, setting, and characters held significant meanings for a certain female market in the 1920s. Overall, these revisionist interpretations of *The Sheik*, as Teo summarizes, acknowledge the ways in which both novel and film “gave credence to women’s sexual desires and sexual autonomy, contributing to a modern understanding and conversation about sex in the 1920s.”³⁰

³⁰ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 88-89.

These revisionist academic interpretations of *The Sheik* place it within a longer historical and cultural trajectory dating back to the 1890s when ideas about female sexuality and traditional gender roles began to change in both Britain and the U.S. Women, especially white middle and upper class women, began to lobby for greater access to education, more freedom to pursue meaningful careers, and the right to vote in political elections. In addition to taking up these political, social, and economic causes, many of these “New Women,” as they were labeled, advocated for greater sexual freedom. Women should be able to enjoy sex on their own terms without any sort of stigma being attached to it. Moreover, many believed that women should have the right to choose to bear and rear children, rather than have it foisted upon them as a social obligation. By the outbreak of World War I, another new type of femininity emerged on the social scene on both sides of the Atlantic: the flapper. While this icon of 1920s youth culture shared some similarities with her predecessor, she differed on several accounts from the previous generation’s New Woman. The flapper, for instance, mobilized both fashion and lifestyle to rebel against patriarchal social norms. Her shortened hemline, plunging neckline, and excessive jewelry were an open challenge to earlier generations’ notions of female propriety. The flapper stayed out late, smoked in public, and drank alcohol in rebellion against the cultural and, sometimes, legal prescriptions against such behavior. She used social dancing and jazz music to explore her sexuality. Some took advantage of new improvements in birth control to engage in premarital sex; while a smaller number rejected marriage and monogamy outright.³¹

Whether Diana Mayo represented more of a New Woman or more of a flapper style character is less important than the fact that Hull wrote *The Sheik* within a broader historical context in which a variety of women were challenging social norms related to gender and

³¹ Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 17-19 and 30.

sexuality.³² By placing Diana's changing relationship to her own sexuality front-and-center, Hull spoke to a broad market of female readers hungry for cultural texts that might legitimize their own diverse and complicated relationships to the subjects of female desire and sexual pleasure. Moreover, as Teo notes, there is a subtle transfer of power *from* Ahmed *to* Diana over the course of *The Sheik*, granting its plot a message of female empowerment that, while understated and conservative, is, nonetheless, present. Early in *The Sheik*, Ahmed may capture and dominate Diana, initially spoiling the new-found sense of independence she has found in the desert. It is ultimately Diana, however, who catalyzes Ahmed's changing relationship to his own sexuality and gender identity from a rapist sheik playboy to a devoted husband. *The Sheik's* plot might conclude in a fairly traditional manner by finding closure in love and heterosexual marriage; it nonetheless had the power to encourage its mostly female audiences to celebrate sexuality, desire, and pleasure in ways that were far from traditional.³³

The Sheik was controversial, however, not just because it encouraged women to explore sexuality on their own terms, but rather because it did so through a narrative that flirted with the topic of miscegenation. While Ahmed is, ultimately, revealed to be white – or at least white enough – by the end of story, the fact remains that for much of *The Sheik* we are led to believe that a white woman is falling in love with Arab man. For many white women in Britain and the U.S., the Arab sheik was a powerful cultural icon through which they could explore the most forbidden of sexual fantasies. While the cultural and historical implications of this miscegenation narrative in the context of British imperialism are important to consider, they have been discussed elsewhere and are also beyond the purview of this project.³⁴ Right now, I want to focus

³² For various interpretations on Diana's relationship to these models of femininity, see: Teo, *Desert Passions*, 89-90.

³³ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 89-91.

³⁴ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 101-108.

specifically on how American women and men made sense of *The Sheik*, mobilizing its characters and narrative to debate and negotiate larger conversations and cultural battles related to ideas about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class that were prevalent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The popularity of this exotic miscegenation narrative in the U.S. was made all the more charged by several interwoven historical factors that surrounded the publication of *The Sheik* and its adaptation to film. First, was the influx of “New Immigrants” coming mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as the Mediterranean. The presence of these newcomers, as we will shortly see, called into question the traditional U.S. black-white color divide, upsetting more conservative understandings of race and whiteness that were rooted in Anglo-Saxon superiority and black inferiority. Second, was the casting of Rudolph Valentino, an Italian immigrant film star with a large female fan base, to play the part of Ahmed Ben Hassan in Paramount’s adaptation of Hull’s novel. Third, was the perceived threat to traditional notions of rugged Anglo-Saxon masculinity that were fostered by the expansion of consumer capitalism and mass entertainment industries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not coincidentally, for many Anglo American males, Valentino – an Italian immigrant film star with a large female fan base and penchant for challenging traditional notions of American masculinity – seemed to embody all of these historical factors from which they felt so threatened.

As historians of American whiteness have noted, between the 1840s-1920s a number of immigrant groups, mostly hailing from Europe, began coming to the U.S. in response to a variety of political and social crises that were plaguing their home states throughout this period. These immigrants were initially Irish and German, but frequently by the late-nineteenth century, were coming primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as some from the Mediterranean.

Jews, Catholics, Poles, Italians, Greeks, and Arabs, among others, came to the U.S. in ever-increasing waves, many seeking economic opportunity and a better life for their families in the U.S. and back home. In a nation that was socially and politically structured along what W. E. B. DuBois described as “the color line,” these New Immigrants upset that line’s simple dichotomy between black and white.³⁵ They were not black, but neither were they wholly white. To be sure, many of these immigrants, at least the ones who hailed from Europe, were, legally speaking, “white on arrival.”³⁶ That is, under the Naturalization Act of 1790, many, including Italians, would have been classified as “free white persons” and, therefore, eligible for citizenship (assuming they met other standardized criteria for citizenship). Still others, like Arab Christian immigrants hailing mostly from Greater Syria, initially had to prove their whiteness in court before they were granted access to the rights of citizenship.³⁷ In either case, many of these New Immigrants, despite their *legal* classification as white and eligibility for citizenship, were *culturally* marked as unassimilable. Many Anglo Americans saw them as dangerous, swarthy, sexually predatory foreigners and welcomed them in hesitantly and reluctantly into the fold of mainstream white society in a period that spanned over a century. Many New Immigrants were subject to varying forms of discrimination and ethnic prejudice. Some, in rare circumstances, were even the victims of racially motivated lynching. The late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a rise in Anglo American xenophobia and anti-immigrant nativism.

³⁵ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 3.

³⁶ Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Michael W. Suleiman, ed., *Arabs in America: Building a New Future* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008); and Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

Whiteness in this period, as Matthew Fry Jacobson notes, was not a monolithic racial category but, rather, existed along a variegated spectrum of privilege and power.³⁸

It was under these historical circumstances that Valentino's career in film began. It was not a coincidence that in many of his earliest films, he was cast as a swarthy villain or side character and not the romantic and heroic lead of his later roles. "He's too foreign looking," remarked film director, D. W. Griffith. "The girls would never like him."³⁹ Valentino's career, however, would forever be changed, when scriptwriter June Mathis saw the actor in *Eyes of Youth* (1919).⁴⁰ She was convinced that Valentino was made for more than just exotic bit parts and convinced director Rex Ingram to cast the actor for the leading romantic role in *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921). Released in the same year, both *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and *The Sheik* propelled Valentino's career to the top. He had become a Hollywood star and an internationally-recognized male sex symbol. As a "Latin Lover," he was still cast to play foreign and exotic characters. However, these characters, like Ahmed Ben Hassan in *The Sheik*, were also the romantic male lead who had the power to woo white women both on the screen and in the audience.

Many of Valentino's most devoted female fans worshipped the star as a cult-like sex object. As film historian Miriam Hansen notes in *Babel and Babylon* (1991), Valentino was the subject of "popularity contests, write-in campaigns, and the circulation of photographs, autographs, and star paraphernalia."⁴¹ The female obsession over Valentino was perhaps no better demonstrated than in the many reports of female-dominated riots that seemed to follow the

³⁸ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³⁹ Quoted in Leider, *Dark Lover*, 88.

⁴⁰ Leider, *Dark Lover*, 97.

⁴¹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 260.

actor. From Philadelphia to Boston and London to Paris, everywhere Valentino went, he seemed to be mobbed by fans and, at least according to the papers, these riots were composed mostly of hysterical women trying to get just a little bit closer to the actor. Even in death, Valentino was plagued by mobs. Following his untimely passing from peritonitis in 1926, mobs of mostly female fans were reported to have rioted along the processional path and outside the church of his New York City funeral.⁴²

The wave of female hysteria surrounding Valentino, though, was more than just some irrational manifestation of unrequited sexual desire. According to Hansen, the consumer market for Hollywood films by the 1920s was dominated by women. Throughout her work, Hansen demonstrates that these female consumers, however, were more than just a market to be exploited by a powerful industry. Rather, in the age of the flapper and the New Woman, the act of going to the cinema was often an empowering experience for women. Theaters, for instance, offered women a space in the public sphere where they could gather individually or collectively. The U.S. was at this point still very much dominated by the Victorian notion of gendered social spheres. Despite the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, men were expected to inhabit the public sphere of work and politics and women were relegated to the domestic sphere of home and childrearing. Of course, the reality of how this ideology played out on a mundane basis was always more complicated. Nonetheless, the idea of gendered spheres of influence held great sway over many American families. The movie theater, like the voting booth in 1920, was fast becoming a venue through which women could engage in new forms of social and political action. The theater offered a temporary reprieve from domestic duties or the watchful eye of male chaperones, providing a space where women could individually or collectively transgress

⁴² Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 260 and Mark Lynn Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols: Hollywood and the Human Sciences in 1920s America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 70 and 83-84.

the social prescriptions that would have them locked away in their homes. The films themselves, as already touched upon, also allowed women to explore their sexuality and indulge in romantic fantasies. Scopophilia, the act of looking at something or someone to derive sexual pleasure, was taboo for women. Men were to be the active agents of the gaze; whereas women were supposed to be the object of the male gaze.⁴³ The largely female cult following of Valentino, therefore, subverted gender conventions rooted in Victorian domesticity and female propriety, offering us an example of what Hansen has labeled an “undomesticated gaze.”⁴⁴ Valentino’s films, therefore, “furnished an occasion for collective expression among women – for conversation, intimacy, and joint ventures – a catalyst for the articulation of common experience, fantasies, and discontents.”⁴⁵ While this alone was controversial enough to make a stir, these public expressions of female desire were made all the more charging by the ways that they intersected with and challenged dominant understandings of race and white supremacy in the early twentieth century.

In an era of heightened xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiment, and popular belief in eugenics, it was no wonder that Valentino, an Italian immigrant actor who played dark, ethnic foreigners and demanded the attention of many white women, drew protracted and vocal criticism from Anglo American men. Numerous anti-Valentino diatribes, like Dick Dorgan’s “A Song of Hate,” filled the papers throughout his career, listing the many reasons why, as Dorgan put it, “All men hate Valentino.”⁴⁶ Of course, not all men hated Valentino. Nor did all women love him. Female journalist, Adela Rogers St. Johns, for instance, remarked in 1924 that

⁴³ Film theorist, Laura Mulvey, has argued that much of Hollywood cinema is predicated upon this patriarchal structuring of vision. See: Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

⁴⁴ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 279.

⁴⁵ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 261.

⁴⁶ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 258.

Valentino, in her opinion, failed to live up to her standards of male beauty as exemplified by rugged Anglo American sex icon, Wallace Reid.⁴⁷ Moreover, a number of scholars, most recently, Mark Lynn Anderson, have attempted to recover Valentino's male fans – both straight and queer – from their erasure out of the historical archive. Nonetheless, the sheer abundance of anti-Valentino rhetoric that spewed from the pens and mouths of America's most vocal white Nativists was indicative of the very popular and very loud anti-immigrant sentiment of the time period.

Public displays of female desire for Valentino and the largely female interest in miscegenation narratives like *The Sheik*, therefore, were upsetting to Anglo American men, many of whom held a hypocritical view towards practices of miscegenation. While legal proscriptions against interracial marriage would not be lifted in the U.S. until 1967 with the passing of *Loving v. West Virginia*, white men were nonetheless often relatively free to indulge in sexual relations with brown and black women. This could include physical and intimate contact but also included imagined fantasies, many of which found expression in Orientalist texts and the male fascination with the Harem. Sexual relations between white men and non-white women were, at times consensual, but often coerced and forced. Because white women had a duty to preserve and perpetuate the race, through the production and rearing of racially pure babies, they were not afforded the same privileges as white men. To fantasize about or have an actual physical relationship with a non-white man was considered one of the gravest offenses a white woman could commit. The Valentino craze, like the plot of *The Sheik's* narrative, offered

⁴⁷ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 257.

up a blatant, if a bit ambiguous, transgression of the social and legal boundaries that policed the lives of white women and people of color in the U.S.⁴⁸

Anglo American men, however, were not just unnerved by these open expressions of white female desire for a foreign and exotic other, but also by the ways in which Valentino, intentionally or not, seemed to be changing the socially acceptable standards of male beauty and masculine behavior. Indeed, following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921, a new style of masculinity largely inspired by Valentino's star image was available to men. Traditional middle class Anglo American standards of masculinity were rooted in Victorian notions about sexual and fiscal self-restraint, the cultivation of moral character, and the mythology of the self-made man who engaged independently and productively in the free market. Valentino, on the other hand, came to symbolize for more traditional American men, the antithesis to their understanding of masculinity. He was suave and sophisticated and showed no sexual self-restraint, as evidenced by his three marriages and the numerous accusations that questioned his sexual orientation. Valentino was also good-looking and fit but not necessarily rugged in a frontiersman or cowboy sort of way. He chose to express himself through fashionable appearances and living a life of fleeting pleasures. Rather than develop his character through traditional hard work, production, and the cultivation of fiscal self-restraint, Valentino seemed to purchase his identity on the free market of the burgeoning *consumer* capitalist society that had been taking over the American economy since the turn of the century. To those who might point towards Valentino as the quintessential, rags-to-riches, immigrant success story, many Anglo American men had a ready-made answer. He was, according to them, a "woman-made-man." Valentino, according to them,

⁴⁸ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 155; Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, 130-131 and 138; and Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 163-165.

did not work hard. Rather, he was discovered, promoted, and sustained through the mobs of female fans who bought his tickets as well as through the patronage of female entertainers with connections to the industry. All Valentino had to do, according to these men, was pose in front of a camera. Moreover, as Gaylyn Studlar has demonstrated, Valentino's reputation as a former New York City "taxi dancer" did not help him in this regard either. Taxi dancers were men who worked at clubs and were paid to dance with female patrons. In the early twentieth century, taxi dancing had gained a reputation as a profession for immigrant men who desired to feed off the loneliness of bored and wealthy white women looking for a thrill while their husbands toiled away in the office.⁴⁹

Both in his films and in the discourses surrounding his celebrity, Valentino, then, represented a new style of masculinity that ran against the grain of traditional Victorian notions of what a man should be. The celebration of fashionable attire and appearances as well as sexual prowess and excess flew in the face of middle class Victorian notions about propriety and self-restraint. In this regard, Valentino represented to many, the male equivalent of the Jazz Age flapper. As such, many men who ascribed to this new form of masculinity were referred to as *sheiks*, a popular term that came into use following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921.⁵⁰ While this new, Jazz Age sheik may have traded in the desert for a dancefloor and his white robes for a three-piece suit and an Italian ascot, the two did share one thing in common: they were often racialized as not-white. When Herbert Howe declared in *Photoplay* that there were "more sheiks in Hollywood than in Sahara," he was, in fact, referring to the dearth of racially other Valentino-imitators that had seemed to besiege the movie colony in the wake of the actor's sweeping success. Race was central to Howe's description of these sheiks: "They slink down the

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, 71 and 135-138 and Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade*, 150-198.

⁵⁰ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 30.

Boulevard, droopy of eye and of cigarette, complexions ranging from oleomargarine to deepest anthracite.” Howe then described two such individuals who had infiltrated a barber shop in Hollywood. One was “dark [and] lowering” in appearance. The other was also “dark” with “slick hair” and, according to the barber, “sexy.”⁵¹

Such were the range of meanings attached to the word *sheik* in the decade following the release of E. M. Hull’s romance novel in 1919. Whether he was an Arab chieftain or a Jazz Age playboy, the sheik of 1920s American culture was sexy, dangerously alluring, and racially dark, even if under the façade he was often a white man in disguise. While an extensive amount of scholarly labor has already been poured into this topic, the fact remains that the bulk of this work focusses almost solely upon Hull or Valentino as the *primary* sources through which to understand the figure of the Arab sheik in American culture. While Hull’s novels as well as Valentino’s films and career were by all means central to the history of America’s cultural interest in the figure of the Arab sheik, especially in the 1920s, the singular focus that many academics have placed upon these two icons has given us an account of their historical significance that is not necessarily unwarranted but definitely overstated when placed within a larger historical trajectory.

A number of exceptions have, to varying degrees, moved analysis of the Arab sheik in American culture beyond this discussion of Hull and Valentino. Hsu-Ming Teo’s *Desert Passions* as well as Amira Jarmakani’s *An Imperialist Love Story* (2015), for instance, trace the historical intersection between Orientalism and European and American romance novels, situating the Arab sheik within a much longer historical and literary trajectory that spans the Medieval period all the way to the present War on Terror. Moreover, Abdelmajid Hajji’s *Arabs*

⁵¹ Howe, “Sheiks of Hollywood,” 58.

in *American Cinema (1894-1930)* (2013), analyzes the numerous imitation and parody films of the 1920s that rode in the wake of *The Sheik*'s popularity, giving us a much better sense of Hollywood's response to the success of Valentino's film.⁵² While this research helps push our historical conversation of the figure of the Arab sheik beyond Hull, Valentino, and the 1920s, it, nonetheless, only enforces the conclusion that this popular cultural icon was the sole creation of romance novelists and Hollywood film producers cashing in on the success of *The Sheik*. Some research points towards influences outside of romance literature and film. The work of Steven C. Caton and Joel C. Hodson, for instance, demonstrates the significance that British Colonel T. E. Lawrence had upon cultural encounters with the popular figure of the Arab sheik in 1920s American culture. "Lawrence of Arabia" was, after all, a white British man made famous, in part, by his penchant for dressing as an Arab. Moreover, Hodson points out the striking similarities between the plot of *Son of the Sheik*, with its emphasis on intrigue and warfare, and the real-life exploits of Colonel Lawrence, who helped lead the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War.⁵³ This body of work also points towards the appeal that "playing Arab" had for some Anglo men, both British and American. This was, as Susan Nance has demonstrated especially true of Anglo American men in the nineteenth century. From travelling poets and artists to fraternal Masons, Nance's *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream* (2009) demonstrates the diverse ways in which the "East" came to signify masculinity in ways not socially acceptable to many Anglo American males in the 1920s. While the figure of the Arab sheik appears throughout Nance's work, which covers both the nineteenth

⁵² Abdelmajid Hajji, *Arabs in American Cinema (1894-1930): Flappers Meet Sheiks in New Movie Genre*, self-published dissertation (U.S.: 2013), 100-106.

⁵³ Steven C. Caton, "The Sheik: Instabilities of Race and Gender in Transatlantic Popular Culture of the Early 1920s," in *Noble Dreams – Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930*, edited by Holly Edwards, 99-117 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 99-106 and Joel C. Hodson, *Lawrence of Arabia and American Culture: The Making of a Transatlantic Legend* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 65-71.

and early twentieth centuries, he is not the sole focus of her research, leaving room for a far more nuanced and detailed exploration of the cultural evolution of this iconic figure in the historical period under consideration.

Project Interventions and Chapter Outlines

It is upon this impressive body of research that I build my own work. Throughout “More Sheiks than the Sahara,” I demonstrate the varied ways that the decade-long fad of sheikmania had a much deeper cultural history, which spanned the century preceding the 1920s. Moreover, I highlight the broad appeal that the sheik had to a diverse body of American men and women throughout this period. More than just a cultural icon around which Anglo Americans navigated, debated, and negotiated the historical forces impacting their lives, the figure of the Arab sheik, as I demonstrate in my last two chapters, permeated into the social and cultural fabric of non-Anglo communities in the U.S. The significance of the sheik outside of mainstream Anglo American cultural debates is a topic which has been long overlooked. In his otherwise insightful essay on *The Sheik*, Caton even goes so far as to state, “What he [the sheik] might have represented to non-white audiences we may never know.”⁵⁴

Fortunately, the historical record has proven Caton’s dire prediction to be woefully inaccurate. Throughout “More Sheiks than the Sahara,” I illuminate the significance that the figure of the Arab sheik had to three distinct but interrelated social demographics in the U.S.: Anglo Americans, Arab Americans, and African Americans. The selection of these three demographics was by no means arbitrary. As previously discussed, the dominant racial hierarchy of the U.S. in the period under consideration divided race along lines of black and white. By the

⁵⁴ Caton, “*The Sheik*,” 99.

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the influx in New Immigrants to the U.S. complicated this binary division. The presence of Eastern and Southern Europeans, many of whom were Jewish and Catholic, called into question prevailing notions of whiteness, which were largely predicated upon the belief in Protestant Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. While technically legally white and eligible for citizenship, these groups were often culturally marked as other or not-quite-white. Moreover, following the U.S. Court of Appeals case, *Dow v. United States* (1915), which declared Syrians to be racially white and, therefore, eligible for naturalization, Arabs were placed into this liminal position between the two extremes of the racial color line.

Studying the figure of the Arab sheik from the vantage of three separate demographics that occupied different positions along the period's dominant racial spectrum offers several insights into the deeply entwined relationship between cultural and social history.⁵⁵ First, it illuminates the ways that different groups of Americans used popular culture – in this instance, the figure of the Arab sheik – to understand, assert, assimilate to, and/or resist the dominant social structures informing their racial identities in U.S. In the case of Arab Americans, engagements with Orientalism are doubly interesting as they offer empirical evidence of the diverse ways in which people respond to stereotypes of themselves. Moreover, a careful analysis of the discourses of each racial demographic as they related to the Arab sheik reveals that popular culture was also used as a means to negotiate differences of class, gender, sexuality, and age *within* each particular community, illuminating the ways in which these communities were by no means monolithic nor socially homogenous. Finally, my dissertation asserts that while

⁵⁵ For an account of the evolution of and differences between social and cultural approaches to history, along with a compelling defense for the efficacy of both approaches, see: Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

Arab Americans and African Americans may have never had as much power in shaping American culture as white, Anglo Americans, they, nonetheless, played a significant, if limited, role in shaping the broader cultural discourses that gave symbolic meaning to the Arab sheik in the period spanning 1830-1930. In certain instances, as I demonstrate, Arab Americans and African Americans played a direct and active role in shaping Anglo cultural attitudes towards the figure of the Arab sheik.

I unpack these larger arguments throughout “More Sheiks than the Sahara,” which proceeds both chronologically as well as thematically. In my first chapter, I illuminate some of the lesser explored origins of American sheikmania. While the romance novel and its subsequent film adaptations played no small part in fostering the explosion of interest in Arab sheiks, this was not the only cultural medium through which Americans expressed their interest in this cultural icon. Neither were white women the only demographic to vociferously consume and find positive meaning in his image. True, many Anglo American men may have openly expressed their hatred of Rudolph Valentino and his two sheik-themed films throughout the 1920s. Such an attitude, however, had not been the primary response that Anglo men had to the figure of the Arab sheik. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many white, middle and upper class men turned their cultural gaze towards the desert, constructing it as a place that could heal the domestic social, political, and economic predicaments impacting their lives. As urbanization, industrialization, and modernity threatened to erode traditional understandings of masculinity, middle and upper class white men saw in their selective view of the Arab sheik an idol of manliness worth emulating. Rugged and free, the romanticized sheik was thought of as a man still very much in charge of his own destiny in a world that *seemed* increasingly out of one’s control. In chapter one, I analyze these themes primarily through an exploration of the life and

career of Bayard Taylor. Part romantic poet, part adventurer, Taylor spent a large portion of his career writing and speaking about his inspired journeys through North and East Africa as well as West Asia. Through his poetry, travelogues, and private correspondence, not to mention his penchant for dressing in local garb, Taylor modeled for other men of his race and class a hybrid identity that promised a rediscovery of traditional white male values even if they may have been dressed in exotic robes.

In my second chapter, I explore the countless number of sheik-themed desert romance films produced by Hollywood both before and after the release of Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*. While much is known about Valentino's two films, we know decidedly less about similar contemporaneous desert romance films. This chapter demonstrates how the genre conventions of the Hollywood desert romance film began to appear as early as 1912 and were well in place and recognized by film critics by 1919, a finding which emphasizes my overall argument that scholars have given far too much authority to Hull's novel and Valentino's films for inspiring the sheikmania of the 1920s. In particular, I trace the evolution of Hollywood's engagement with the theme of miscegenation in these sheik-themed desert romance films throughout the period spanning the years 1909-1927. I reveal that throughout this period, Hollywood filmmakers had developed several proven and successful strategies for dealing with this topic. With the exception of Valentino's *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, none of the many sheik-themed desert romances released in the silent period caused all that much controversy. Ultimately, I conclude that Anglo American males of the period were far less resistant to sheikmania than has previously been acknowledged and more embittered by the fact that a woman (Hull) and an immigrant male (Valentino) seemed to be wrestling from them the power to make meaning out of the image of the Arab sheik.

While my first two chapters deal primarily with Anglo American engagements with the figure of the Arab sheik, the second half of my dissertation introduces voices of color into the conversation. Chapter three, for instance, explores the diverse reactions that Arab Americans had to this nineteenth and early twentieth century cultural icon. Covering an historical period that saw ever increasing numbers of immigration from Syria and Lebanon, my third chapter uses the figure of the Arab sheik as a lens through which we can better understand the cultural lives of Arab Americans. Some, like Ameen Rihani, one of the founding fathers of Arab American literature, vocally opposed the ways in which romance novels and films exoticized the Arab world, presenting it as a fantasy land of splendor and abundance where white women were never safe from the clutching hands of romantic desert sheiks. Still, others found the Arab sheik and, more broadly, American Orientalist attitudes to be easily exploitable gimmicks that could not only foster Arab immigrant assimilation to the U.S. but also promote the careers and businesses of individual Arab Americans. Throughout the 1920s, for instance, Arabic food restaurants were increasingly being named after *The Sheik* or *Son of the Sheik* as a way to drum up business and invite white clientele by exploiting two of the most popular films of the decade. Much of chapter three focuses on Sheik Hadji Tahar, a real life “Genuine Sheik” who immigrated to the U.S. in the 1876 and entertained American audiences through his appearances in and collaborations with an impressive array of entertainment venues throughout his lengthy career, which spanned from the 1870s to the early 1930s.⁵⁶ Sheik Tahar’s impressive career not only illuminates yet more ways in which Arab Americans engaged with the figure of the Arab sheik, but also highlights Arab American contributions to the evolution of the modern American entertainment industry at large.

⁵⁶ “Here is a Genuine Sheik,” *Detroit Free Press* (August 15, 1932): 2

My fourth chapter picks up where this dissertation began and takes a second look at the 1920s cultural phenomenon of sheikmania within the context of the Jazz Age and the Great Migration. Described by novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald as the “Jazz Age,” the 1920s came to signal for many Americans an era of material and sexual abundance, loose social morality, and an ever-increasing investment in consumer goods as an expression of personal identity. The youthful female flapper was and, perhaps, still is the quintessential icon of the decade. She drank and smoked; danced socially at late-night jazz clubs and explored new expressions of her sexuality both on and off the dance floor. She spent her, often, meager earnings on new clothes, jewelry, and movie tickets; and, overall, did what she could to rebel against the constricting Victorian era social conventions of the nineteenth century. As previously discussed, it was within this particular historical context that the word *sheik* began to take on new meanings that were aesthetically removed from its roots in Orientalist film, literature, and art. Following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921, the word came to denote a good-looking, stylish, suave, and sexually liberal young man – qualities which were, often associated with the “sheik of cinema” himself, Rudolph Valentino. In addition to conjuring the image of an Arab chieftain, therefore, *sheik* also came to signify the male equivalent to the female flapper. Here was a new and exciting model of masculinity. One that seemed to fit with the times for many Jazz Age youth living in the growing metropolitan centers of the northern U.S. Moreover, as an increasing number of African Americans made their way to these cities during the Great Migration, the modern, urban sheik offered a powerful cultural icon through which young black men and women could openly explore their relationships to their own sexualities and racial identities in ways that were eminently more meaningful and in tune with their new, urban environment. Of course, not all African Americans were so enamored with the modern sheik. Just as Valentino and the sheik

drew criticism from the social guardians of white middle class propriety, so too, did he take flack from black conservatives. For many, both Valentino and the new style of masculinity he inspired served as scapegoats that explained the rise of urban crime within northern black neighborhoods. Moreover, black debates surrounding the lifestyle of the urban sheik mobilized concerns that many had about the ever-increasing roles that consumer capitalism and mass entertainment seemed to be playing in the daily lives of African Americans.

For roughly a century, popular images and ideas about the Arab sheik played a key role in shaping daily encounters with the social, political, and cultural forces impacting the lives of Americans between the years 1830-1930. This rang true for Anglo Americans, Arab American, as well as African Americans, male and female alike. Vice versa, it was the same social, political, and cultural factors that would shape American ideas and images about the Arab sheik throughout the historical period under consideration. What follows is, in part, an exploration of this dialectical relationship between context and content. But mostly, “More Sheiks than the Sahara,” is a testament to the diverse ways that Americans have used culture as means to navigate and understand the forces that shaped their daily lives.

CHAPTER I

“From the Desert I Come to Thee ...” Nineteenth Century Anglo American Masculinity and the Historical Roots of Sheikmania

In an early scene from Paramount Pictures’ adaptation of Edith M. Hull’s romance novel, *The Sheik* (1919), the dark and alluring Ahmed Ben Hassan (Rudolph Valentino) sets his eye upon British belle Diana Mayo (Agnes Ayers). Infatuated with her beauty, the desert sheik hides below the balcony of Diana’s Biskra hotel suite. Safe from her gaze, Ahmed recites the lyrics to Amy Woodforde-Finden’s “Kashmiri Love Song” (1902). Based upon a poem of the same name by Laurence Hope, “Kashmiri Love Song” is an exotic tale of unrequited love set in the Orient. “Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar,” bellows Ahmed. “Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell?” From the balcony, Diana listens intently, one hand clutching her chest, her peaked brows and smile suggesting a heartfelt curiosity for this romantic mystery singer – a sentiment echoed by many of the American women theatergoers watching this scene unfold before their own eyes.

Over sixty years prior to the release of *The Sheik*, Pennsylvania-born poet and travelogue author Bayard Taylor described a scene that was nearly identical in his poem “Bedouin Song” (1855):

From the Desert I come to thee
On a stallion shod with fire;
And the winds are left behind
In the speed of my desire.
Under thy window I stand,
And the midnight hears my cry:

I love thee, I love but thee,
With a love that shall not die.¹

Taylor's poem was remarkable not only for its similarity to the Hollywood film produced decades later but also that it was penned by a white (Anglo-Saxon) American male. This was, after all, the demographic that would, throughout the 1920s, wage a vocal and xenophobic campaign against all things related to Rudolph Valentino and *The Sheik*. "The Nordic sneered at Valentino while his women folk thrilled to this jungle python of a lover," noted Don Ryan in one cartoon depicting male and female film patrons attending a screening of *The Sheik*.² This sentiment, while certainly not shared by all white males of the period, was, nonetheless, popular and disseminated often throughout the press and Hollywood trade journals of the 1920s. Taylor's "Bedouin Song," however, reveals a deeply felt celebration and identification with the romantic Arab sheik, a sentiment, as I demonstrate throughout this chapter, that was shared by many Anglo American males in the mid-nineteenth century. What had changed between the 1850s and 1920s to produce such radically different attitudes?

It is important to note that *The Sheik* was released in a general period of heightened Anglo American xenophobia, which was largely a reaction to the growing number of immigrants coming to the United States from Eastern and Southern Europe as well as the Mediterranean in the period spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The presence of these "New Immigrants" upset America's dominant racial hierarchy, which was rooted in the idea of Protestant Anglo-Saxon superiority and black inferiority. The influx of Catholics and Orthodox Christians, European Jews, Italians, Greeks, and Syrian Arabs, among others, challenged prevailing notions of whiteness. *The Sheik*, with its plot centered around a white woman falling in

¹ Bayard Taylor, "Bedouin Song," in *Poems of the Orient*, 86-87 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), 86.

² Don Ryan, "Has the Great Lover Become Just a Celebrity?" *Motion Picture Classic* (May 1926), 69.

love with a man we are led to believe is an Arab, was so controversial because it flirted with the social and legal codes that forbade miscegenation in the U.S. Such narratives were doubly threatening when the Arab sheik was played by an Italian immigrant like Valentino.

As noted in this dissertation's introduction, much has been made about the sexual and exotic allure of literary and cinematic characters like Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan to Anglo female producers and consumers of British and American popular culture. Likewise, the charged and vitriolic responses of Anglo males both towards *The Sheik* and, more broadly, Rudolph Valentino has been well documented. Much of this scholarship, however, focuses narrowly on the 1920s – a period of rampant anti-immigrant sentiment – eliding the fact that many Anglo American males in the preceding century would have shared markedly different attitudes towards the figure of the Arab sheik. While the sheik of the 1920s may have been the brainchild of romance novelists like E. M. Hull, the cultural fascination with desert-dwelling Bedouin and Arab Sheiks that would lay the historical groundwork for the decade-long fad of sheikmania very much had its roots in the cultural productions of nineteenth-century Anglo American males. The works of artists, poets, travelogue writers, and popular academics reveal that many of these men espoused positive attitudes towards Bedouin Arabs and Arab sheiks.

These cultural encounters were, of course, not necessarily any less racist than those that disparaged Arabs and the Orient. In fact, they were very much rooted in racialized ideas that stereotyped Bedouin Arabs as naturally virile, brave, and free-spirited. As Susan Nance has demonstrated, in the years surrounding the Civil War, locales like North Africa and West Asia were often culturally marked as “utterly masculine spaces.”³ Moreover, Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that this nineteenth century cultural investment in “barbarian virtues” was directed at a

³ See: Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 79 and 269n3.

broad array of foreign and “primitive” peoples. Jacobson further highlights that this cultural interest in barbarous peoples was marked by a “dynamic ambivalence” that both romanticized and idealized some non-white people while still dominating them culturally, socially, and politically. In the nineteenth century, these acts of selective appropriation and romantic idealization were rooted in anxieties about the effects of modernity, especially upon traditional understandings of Anglo American masculinity that valued personal autonomy, self-sufficiency, the moderation of desires, ruggedness, and closeness to nature. For many Anglo American males, notes Jacobson:

[W]ork was increasingly rationalized by bureaucracy ... nature’s rhythms were lost and the day’s tempo was dictated exclusively by the tick of the clock ... the aesthetic pleasures of natural greenery choked behind a veil of industrial smoke or perished beneath harsh slabs of urban pavement ... [and] fashions, comforts, and conveniences of a thousand kinds seemed to interfere with civilized humanity’s hold on “authentic” life.⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century, then, Anglo American males, reacting against the forces of modernity, industrialization, and urbanization, oriented themselves towards the desert and its Arab inhabitants and invested in them a cultural authority that would allow them to rediscover masculine virtues like liberty and autonomy, strength, health, and closeness to nature, as well a vague sense of adventure that was felt missing from their everyday lived experiences.

As I demonstrate later, this cultural attitude was very much present in Bayard Taylor’s literary productions. Described by one biographer as a “cultural phenomenon of considerable interest and significance ... during most of his life,” Taylor’s life, career, and voluminous body of work serves as a thorough and nuanced case study into the positive attitudes that many Anglo American males invested into desert Bedouin and Arab sheiks.⁵ Taylor not only traveled

⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign People’s at home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 132-133.

⁵ Paul C. Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1973), 7.

throughout North Africa and West Asia in the early 1850s and again in 1874, but he wrote and spoke about it extensively in his travel writings, poems, personal correspondences, and public lectures. Throughout his work, Taylor echoed many of the commonly held opinions about Bedouin Arabs, seeing them as brave and noble warriors and “free sons of the desert.” Moreover, Taylor believed the desert to be a therapeutic space where one could escape the anxieties, trappings, and exhaustion of modern civilization to discover a renewed sense of vigor, health, adventure, and rugged masculinity. This was accomplished not only by his excursion to the Orient but also through his penchant for dressing in local garb and attempting to pass as an Arab or a Muslim, a practice common to many Anglo American travelers at the time. This disguise offered Anglo American men, to borrow from Philip J. Deloria’s work on a similar subject, the ability to express and live out their cultural investment in the Arab sheik through “concrete gestures that possessed physical and emotional meaning.”⁶

As Susan Nance and Holly Edwards have both already demonstrated, Taylor’s literary and poetic accounts of the Arab world spoke primarily to upwardly mobile and educated Anglo American men and women of the nineteenth century. The work of literary and artistic figures like Taylor, among others, came across as far more nuanced and informed than some of the other contemporaneous accounts of the region, like school text books and dime novels, which often demonized Arabs and Muslims, portraying them as barbaric heathens. Moreover, the romanticism Taylor invested in the desert and its inhabitants fueled Anglo American fantasies about rekindling the autonomy and masculinity that many felt were disappearing in the face of modernity. Taylor’s good looks, however, also endeared him to women as well. Given his status as a male sex symbol and penchant for dressing in local Arab garb, Taylor was, according to one

⁶ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 6.

scholars, the Anglo precursor to Valentino's far more controversial Ahmed Ben Hassan.⁷ This comparison of Taylor to Valentino, points towards the ways in which nineteenth century Anglo American males, ironically, laid the cultural groundwork for the sheikmania of which many of them would oppose in the 1920s. This, however, was not Taylor's only contribution. As I demonstrate in this chapter, Taylor's poetry directly contributed to the plot conventions of the desert romance genre, laying the literary ground upon which later authors, like E. M. Hull, would construct their own dessert fantasies of racial miscegenation.

Moreover, a thorough analysis of Taylor's poetry, travelogues, and personal correspondences, reveals an even more complex view of Arabs than Nance or Edwards' research demonstrates. True, he often romanticized the desert and Bedouin Arabs in ways that resonated with dominant Anglo American understandings of the region. The Bedouin Arab in Taylor's work was often portrayed as brave, noble, and independent. Yet, Taylor's accounts of the region were also peppered with examples of violent, corrupt, and cowardly Bedouin sheiks, bent on cheating and scamming European and American travelers. Still others were intelligent, humble, generous, and pious. While the influence of his own historical, social, and cultural circumstances were ever-present throughout Taylor's body of work, his writings, nonetheless, also offered Arabs a surprising degree of individuality; none more so than in his treatment of an Egyptian guide named Achmet with whom he seemed to have struck up a genuine and personal, but complicated, friendship throughout his travels on the Nile River. Taylor's relationship to the region was, therefore, complex, often navigating the influence of his Orientalist cultural milieu while also simultaneously trying to remain faithful to his own personal experiences.

⁷ Holly Edwards, ed., *Noble Dreams - Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 120.

“Oh! That the Desert Were My Dwelling Place ...”: Oriental Ventures and Bedouin Encounters in the Nineteenth Century Anglo American Culture

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Americans and Europeans took a keen interest in the romance of the desert and the lives of its Arab inhabitants, writing about them in an ever-growing body of romantic poetry and travel literature. These observations were, in part, rooted in Orientalist fantasy and, for many European writers, colonial prerogatives. However, the trafficking in images and ideas about Arab sheiks, the Bedouin, and Oriental deserts were also the result of real world encounters by an ever-increasing number of white Americans and Europeans who made the journey east. While a few adventurous Europeans traversed the deserts of North Africa and Arabia between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, it was really not until the end of the latter century that the desert would be “opened up,” so to speak, for increased exploration.⁸ In order to better understand the conditions that would lay the historical groundwork for America’s cultural obsession with the Arab sheik, we must first consider the changing political dynamic between the Ottoman Empire and European powers like Great Britain and France.

Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Ottoman Empire dominated much of the region spanning from West Asia across North Africa and, at varying points of time, up into Southeastern Europe. Throughout this period, the Ottomans operated on a plain of relative political equality, if not superiority, to the fledgling European imperial states to its north and west. With its capital in Anatolia (modern day Turkey), the empire was managed primarily by ethnic Turks despite ruling over large swaths of territory that had majority Arab populations. The overbearing stature of the Ottomans in relation to Europe sparked both the denigration of and genuine fascination with the Ottoman Turk in European political, religious, and cultural

⁸ For more on these early explorers, see: Kathryn Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1981), 7-18.

encounters with the region. While the themes of seduction and miscegenation so popular to later sheik-themed romances were often present in European cultural productions in this period, they were more often than not set in an Ottoman backdrop with Turkish characters. The political circumstances were such that Arabs, the Bedouin, and the desert, not to mention sheiks, were not consistently-occurring popular cultural fascinations for Europeans during this period.⁹

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the scales of political power between Europe and the Ottoman Empire began to tip. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt. The French occupation would only last until 1801, when they were ousted by the British, ushering in a period of competition between both European powers to colonize North Africa and the remnants of a receding Ottoman Empire. The French would lay claim to much of North Africa, including Algeria, Tunisia, and most of Morocco. Conversely, the British took interest in Egypt, Sudan, and the Arabian Peninsula, all of which offered strategic geopolitical holdings on the way to Britain's prized colony of India. Moreover, after the ultimate defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the League of Nations Mandate System relegated Syria and Lebanon to France and Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq to Great Britain.¹⁰

More than just a geopolitical realignment of imperial powers, however, this shift in hard power between the Ottoman Empire and Europe also helped foster the cultural conditions under which the Arab sheik entered in the cultural imaginations of both Europeans and Americans. The French and British presence facilitated an increased exposure to the territories and subject peoples of the once-grand Ottoman Empire. Fueled by curiosity, many Americans, like Bayard Taylor among others, would follow suit. The nineteenth century became a time of intrepid

⁹ Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 37-65 and Zachary Lockman *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (2004), second edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 38-65.

¹⁰ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 65 and Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 66-99.

exploration, as increasing amounts of adventurous men *and* women began making their way into these new and “undiscovered” spaces, producing a voluminous body of art, literature, and poetry about their experiences abroad. It was in this context, that many travelers began to journey into the Sahara and Arabian Deserts, romanticizing it, in part, as a pristine locale of solitude, self-discovery, and love.¹¹ This sentiment was best expressed by Lord Byron in his narrative poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (1812-1818):

Oh! that the Desert were my dwelling-place,
With one fair Spirit for my minister,
That I might fall forget the human race,
And, hating no one, love but only her!¹²

But the desert was far from uninhabited and it was there that the Western romance with Bedouin Arabs would come into blossom.

Historically, the Bedouin originated in the Arabian peninsula. They are a nomadic, tribal people with a rich tradition of epic poetry. Each tribe was led by a *sheikh* who was chosen by a particular family within the tribe. Originally pagans, the Bedouin were some of Muhammad’s earliest converts to Islam and played a key role in the spread of the religion and establishment of the vast Arab Empire that spanned as far east as modern day Iraq and west as Morocco.¹³ While European accounts of Bedouin Arabs go as far back as the Crusades, it was in the late eighteenth century that a number of beliefs about them were consolidated into a stock set of literary tropes that would appear routinely in nineteenth century European and American written accounts of these nomadic people. Many, for instance, believed the Bedouin were racially pure Arabs, whose blood, culture, and language were not diluted by proximity to the many foreign influences of the cosmopolitan urban centers of the Ottoman Empire’s Arab provinces. The Bedouin were,

¹¹ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 65-67 and Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, 32-53.

¹² Quoted in Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, 33.

¹³ Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, 5-6 and 21.

moreover, romanticized as independent, faithful, and hospitable sons of the desert. Barbaric as their lifestyle might appear and as harsh as their desert abode was, there was a simplicity and innocence to it, marked by a proximity to nature and freedom of movement that one was hard-pressed to experience anymore in the industrializing and urbanizing metropolitan centers of Western Europe and the U.S. In short, the Bedouin were the latest in a long line of “noble savages” that had come to fascinate Europeans and Americans since the early days of European imperial expansion.¹⁴

American understandings of Bedouin Arabs were, no doubt, partially informed by the works of British and French Orientalists who presented the Bedouin as a pure race of noble savages. However, a variety of historical factors related to anxieties surrounding race and gender in the U.S. would cause the Bedouin Arab to take on additional significance in the minds of many Anglo Americans. Some Anglo American males, for instance, saw in the Bedouin, as well as other non-white peoples, masculine tendencies that were felt to be lacking in modern American society. Ruggedness, vigor, strength, and other “barbarian virtues,” if appropriated in moderate portions could serve to remedy the perceived effects of “over-civilization”: weakness, effeminacy, sentimentality, softness, and indecisiveness. Moreover, the selective appropriation of “barbarian virtues,” as discussed earlier, was the perfect remedy to counter other negative effects of modernity, industrialization, and urbanization.¹⁵ Hence, American accounts are riddled with descriptions of Bedouin Arabs that espouse their mastery of horsemanship, skill with combat arms, and bravery in battle, alongside their simple lives and free-spirited nature.¹⁶

¹⁴ Teo, *Desert Passions*, 66-67; Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, 6-18; and Fuad Sha’ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: The Roots of Orientalism in America* (Durham: The Acorn Press, 1991), 185-189.

¹⁵ Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 132-133.

¹⁶ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 114-122 and Sha’ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought*, 185-189.

Moreover, just as Orientalism was utilized by some in the U.S. to reassert traditional notions of masculinity, so too could it be used to shore up class distinctions. As Susan Nance has demonstrated, by the mid-nineteenth century, a particular expression of Orientalism had manifested within the educated and upwardly mobile cultural circles of Anglo Americans living in the Midwest and Northeast. This particular mode of Orientalism is, according to Nance, best encapsulated by the Latin phrase *ex oriente lux*, meaning “from the East comes light.” Originally a term used by New England Transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1840s, *ex oriente lux* quickly became a style of Orientalism marked by its purported claims to truth. While other sources, like school books, dime novels, Barbary captivity narratives, and some biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, sought to vilify Arabs and Muslims, works operating under the guise of *ex oriente lux* sought to dispel common and, often, negative myths about Islam, Arabs, and the East.

The demand for such a message found expression in the ever-growing market of informed travelogues and public lyceum lectures. While the dominant mode of expression in these sources comes across as much more ethnographic and positive towards their subjects, many of these authors’ works are, nonetheless, infused with racialized stereotypes that romanticized Bedouin Arabs. Consumption of goods and messages circulating within the more refined tradition of *ex oriente lux* allowed its mostly middle and upper class patrons mediums through which they could self-identify as educated, cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and more tolerant than the toiling masses who purportedly succumbed to unquestioned religious assumptions and base ethnic bigotry.¹⁷

¹⁷ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 51-53.

A variety of interacting factors, therefore, served to imbue the Bedouin and, by extension, the Arab sheik with specific historical meanings in nineteenth century American culture. First of which, was the inherited tradition of European Orientalism. This did not mean that Americans necessarily utilized Orientalism to justify British, French, or Spanish colonialism across North Africa and West Asia. Americans, in some instances, actually celebrated the Bedouin precisely *because* they resisted European dominance.¹⁸ Nonetheless the core of Orientalism – “the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate ... accounts concerning the Orient” to quote Edward Said – was ever-present in Anglo American writing on the region, its people, and their culture.¹⁹ Closely related, were commonly-held ideas about race, which was believed to express itself not only physically on the body but culturally and socially as well through a given people’s customs. Race was, according to many, passed down both biologically through blood but also forged in the crucible of a people’s geographic environment. In the case of the Bedouin, it was the desert. Throughout the nineteenth century and before the Bedouin were racialized as independent, honorable, but also fierce noble savages. Anglo American men indulged these romantic fantasies, in part, to seek adventure and self-discovery in the sublime vastness of the desert but also to assuage gendered anxiety about the threat posed by modernity. If the desert could make a man out of an Arab, went the logic, imagine what it could do for a white man, most of whom already viewed themselves as racially superior to Arabs. Finally, accounts of Bedouin Arabs, especially those that appeared in more informed travelogues and public lyceum lectures, further served to individuate male and female Anglo American consumers as educated, worldly, tolerant and respectable members of the middle and upper class.

¹⁸ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 121.

¹⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978), 25th anniversary edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 2-3.

The complex interplay of historical factors informing this particular American understanding of Bedouin Arabs was exemplified in Washington Irving's popular biography of the Prophet Mohammed, *Mahomet and His Successors* (1849). The biography, which was according to Irving "intended for a family library," appealed precisely to the educated and upwardly mobile Americans for whom the *ex oriente lux* message held special significance. In writing a biography about the founder of Islam, Irving wished, as he noted in the book's preface, "to digest into an easy, perspicuous, and flowing narrative, the admitted facts concerning Mahomet." In other words, here was a work intended for an educated audience that purported to expand their understanding of the world via the transmission of facts rather than bigotry, stereotypes, and unverified assumptions.²⁰

Early in *Mahomet and His Successors*, Irving describes the social and historical conditions of seventh century Arabia almost immediately drawing a racial distinction between settled and cosmopolitan Arabs and the nomadic Bedouin:

The agricultural and trading Arabs, however, the dwellers in towns and cities, have never been considered the true type of the race. They became softened by settled and peaceful occupations, and lost much of their original stamp by an intercourse with strangers.²¹

He continues, noting that it "was among the other class of Arabs, the rovers of the desert, the 'dwellers in tents' ... that the national character was preserved in all its primitive force and freshness."²² Here, Irving upholds the trope of Bedouin racial purity. He also discusses the primitive but manly leadership of the *sheikh*, "whose spear, planted beside his tent, was the ensign of command."²³ Irving, however, qualifies this statement by noting the limitations placed

²⁰ Washington Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors* (New York: The Co-Operative Publication Society, 1849), 16

²¹ Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*, 20.

²² Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*, 21.

²³ Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*, 21.

upon his power, which was always subjects to “the opinions and inclinations of his people.”²⁴ While Bedouin tribal politics might at first appear authoritarian, there was, according to Irving, great freedom to be found in their tribal desert society. We see how quickly Irving slides into romanticism, a motion which only hastens when he begins discussing the prowess and skilled horsemanship of the Bedouin: “[T]he Arab of the desert [was] familiar from his infancy with the exercise of arms. None could excel him in the use of the bow, the land and the scimitar, and the adroit and graceful management of the horse.”²⁵ Irving concludes by reminding his reader that though the Bedouin might be “a restless and predatory warrior, he was [also] generous and hospitable.”²⁶

Irving’s *Mahomet and His Successors*, along with the many European works that preceded it, left their mark on Bayard Taylor, whose travel literature, poetry, and lectures did much to further popularize Arabs, the Bedouin, and the figure of the sheik in Anglo American culture of the nineteenth century.²⁷ While Taylor may have not been the first or only American to take an interest in these topics, the breadth and popularity of the work he produced during his short career as an American man of letters certainly warrants an in depth analysis.

A Poet in the Land of the East: Bayard Taylor’s Oriental Works

Between 1851-1854, and much later in 1874, Bayard Taylor traveled to various locales within Africa and the Ottoman Empire as well as India, China, and Japan. Americans back home stayed up to date with Taylor’s journey through his published articles in the *New York Tribune* and other smaller papers. He also chronicled these adventures in a three-volume series of

²⁴ Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*, 21.

²⁵ Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*, 23.

²⁶ Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*, 24.

²⁷ Sha’ban, *Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought*, 62.

travelogues: *A Journey to Central Africa* (1854), *The Lands of the Saracen* (1854),²⁸ and *A Visit to India, China, and Japan in the Year 1853* (1855). Upon his return to the U.S. in 1854, Taylor went on a lyceum tour, educating and entertaining the American public while simultaneously promoting his travelogues. Travel literature for Taylor, however, was always just a means to financial stability; his true passion was poetry, from which his interest and experience in the Orient provided no small amount of inspiration. Taylor wrote numerous poems throughout his travels overseas, ultimately compiling them in his critically-acclaimed *Poems of the Orient* (1854).

His audience consisted largely of the educated and upwardly mobile Anglo American inhabitants of the Northeast and Midwest. These included the middle and upper-class book-reading public who could also be found in attendance at his lyceum presentations. Taylor's work in this regard fit, in part, within the tradition of *ex oriente lux* discussed above. Like others in this genre, it appealed to his readership's thirst for knowledge about the cultures and lifestyles of peoples around the world, thus fulfilling middle and upper class desires for self-improvement and personal growth through education and shoring up perceived class distinctions between themselves and the less educated and presumably more bigoted class of Americans below them.

Gender, too, would play a key role in the construction of Taylor's celebrity status in the mid-nineteenth century. Boys and young men, for instance, took further interest in Taylor's descriptions of the Orient as a place of adventure where one could rekindle a sense of rugged masculinity.²⁹ Taylor also exuded sex appeal. He was described by one contemporary biographer as follows: "[S]ix feet in height, straight, athletic, full of life, with dark brown eyes and hair. He

²⁸ *Saracen* is the Greek and Latin word for Arab, which was also commonly used throughout Europe in the early Medieval period. See: Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East*, 24-25.

²⁹ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 69-71.

was full of magnetism to his finger tips.”³⁰ These good looks and magnetism seemed to endear him to his female followers. In a personal correspondence to poet R. H. Stoddard in November 1854, Taylor commented upon the women who always seemed to be following him.³¹ Elsewhere, Taylor recalled the many lectures he gave in “crammed houses” full of “breathless” women.³²

The public at large was most interested in his travelogues, a point of contention with Taylor, who always thought of himself as a poet first. Writing and promoting his travelogues, among the other editorial work he did throughout his life, were always a constant reminder of how little time he actually had to work on his poetry. Taylor primarily saw the audience for his poetry as consisting of other educated poets living and working within his social sphere, with whom he spent much of his free time trying to cultivate a shining reputation. It is difficult to gauge how well-received Taylor’s poetry was among this crowd because he had a tendency, not uncommon at the time, to write good reviews of others’ works in exchange for positive reviews of his own. Nonetheless, of all his poetical works, *Poems of the Orient* was, in the estimation of one biographer, the most popular.³³

Throughout his career, Taylor would, of course, write about and travel to other geographic regions. Nonetheless, one cannot deny the special significance that the Orient held for the man. Taylor, no doubt, drew inspiration from the many Europeans and Americans whose writing, art, and travels in and about the East preceded or existed alongside his own. Not surprisingly, he was tasked with writing and editing two compilation works – *Cyclopaedia of*

³⁰ Albert H. Smyth, *Bayard Taylor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 29.

³¹ Bayard Taylor, Letter to Mr. And Mrs. R. H. Stoddard, Auburn, New York (November 9, 1854), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, vol. 1, 4th edition, edited by Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, 292-295 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), 293-294.

³² Quoted in Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 72.

³³ Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor*, 19-20, 108-108, and 116-117 and Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 72-75.

Modern Travel (1859) and *Travels in Arabia* (1872); both chronicled the eighteenth and nineteenth century adventures of notable Europeans throughout Africa, Arabia, and the Arab Ottoman territories. Taylor also admitted that he was, in part, inspired to travel east by American artist Miner Kellogg's sketches of Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey.³⁴ *A Journey to Central Africa* was, moreover, indebted to the works of several eighteenth and nineteenth century British, French, and Prussian Egyptologists.³⁵ Taylor also dedicated *Lands of the Saracen* to none other than Washington Irving. It was, according to Taylor, Irving "who, more than any other American author ... revived the traditions, restored the history, and illustrated the character of that brilliant and heroic [Arabic] people."³⁶

Despite Taylor's description of Arabs as "brilliant and heroic," *Lands of the Saracen* is also peppered with accounts of violent, corrupt, and cowardly Bedouin sheiks, ready to cheat American and European travelers out of as much money as they can. Taylor and others, no doubt, came across such individuals on their travels throughout the region.³⁷ But he also encountered and wrote about Arab sheiks who were intelligent, humble, generous, and pious. While the influence of his own historical, social, and cultural conditions is ever-present throughout Taylor's body of work, his writings, nonetheless offered Arabs a surprising degree of individuality. He wrote, for example, quite generously and positively of his Egyptian guide, Achmet, throughout *Journey to Central Africa*. Taylor's relationship to the region was, therefore, complex, often navigating the influence of his Orientalist cultural milieu while simultaneously remaining faithful to his own personal experiences and encounters.

³⁴ Edwards, ed., *Wicked Dreams - Noble Pleasures*, 120.

³⁵ Bayard Taylor, *Journey to Central Africa; Or, Life and Landscapes from Egypt to the Negro Kingdoms of the White Nile* (1854), 10th edition (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1856), 4.

³⁶ Bayard Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen; or, Pictures of Palestine, Asia Minor, Sicily, and Spain* (1854/1855) (New York: Arno Press, 1977), n.p.

³⁷ Tidrick, *Heart-Beguiling Araby*, 22.

Similarly, Taylor often wrote and spoke in a variety of literary voices and tones that ranged the gamut of expression, from ecstatic romanticism to sober, ethnographic observation. Informed by the works of his European and American predecessors, he too saw in the Orient a place of romantic self-discovery, free from the restricting confines and drudgery of modern America. Moreover, like other Anglo American men of his generation, Taylor often saw Bedouin Arabs as the torchbearers of a ruggedness and virility thought to be in decline among American males. Taylor expressed these sentiments not only in his writing, but also in his penchant for dressing as a native, about which he often wrote.

To briefly summarize, Taylor was popular among the educated, upwardly mobile crowds who found in his work, especially his travel writing and lectures, an *ex oriente lux* message that furthered their own self-identification as intelligent, cosmopolitan, and tolerant consumers of American culture. His attraction to adventure made him especially popular with young men and boys but his good looks and exotic flair also imbued his celebrity with more than its fair share of sex appeal. One scholar has argued that Bayard Taylor was a sort of nineteenth century Anglo predecessor to Rudolph Valentino.³⁸ In many ways, Taylor laid the cultural groundwork that would later sustain American sheikmania of the 1920s. He did this, in part, by contributing to the popular sex appeal of the white man disguised as an Arab. However, as I demonstrate, at the end of this chapter, his poetry also helped to establish the literary conventions from which later authors like E. M. Hull would craft their own desert romance novels in the early twentieth century.

Bayard Taylor was born in rural Pennsylvania in the year 1825, the son of Joseph Taylor and Rebecca (Way) Taylor, who were of English, German, and Swiss descent. He had at an early

³⁸ Edwards, *Noble Dreams - Wicked Pleasures*, 120.

age discovered a passion not only for reading but in writing as well. He published his first piece of travel writing about a visit to the Brandywine battlefield in the *West Chester Register* at age fifteen. The following year, saw the publication of his first poem in the *Saturday Evening Post*.³⁹

From a family of modest means, Taylor was unable to afford college and instead at age seventeen acquired an apprenticeship with a printer in West Chester. He was less than enthused with the work and soon set out to buy himself out of the four-year apprenticeship only a year into it. He acquired the money through the publication of his first volume of poetry as well as advancements from publishers to write about an upcoming trip he was to make to Europe.⁴⁰

At age nineteen, Taylor ventured to Europe, camping and traveling on foot as cheaply as possible. He published *Views Afoot*, a full account of his travels through Europe in 1846. With *Views Afoot*, Taylor was beginning to establish a name as a travel writer. Upon returning, he did some teaching as well as editing work for a number of journals and papers. By 1848 Taylor was in contact with Horace Greeley, owner of the *New York Tribune*, with whom he would have a life-long business partnership. Between 1848-1850, Taylor honed his travel writing skills out west during the California Gold Rush, which he chronicled in *Eldorado* (1850). Upon his return, Taylor invested some money in the *Tribune* and soon Greeley offered him an advance to travel through Africa and Asia.⁴¹

Taylor was more than obliged to make the trip for both personal and professional reasons. Most tragically, he was still recovering from the very recent death of his wife Mary (Agnew) Taylor. The trip was, in part, then emotionally therapeutic. As Taylor wrote to his mother from

³⁹ Smyth, *Bayard Taylor*, 12-13 and 17 and Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor*, 17

⁴⁰ Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor*, 17.

⁴¹ Smyth, *Bayard Taylor*, 85; Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor*, 18-19; and Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 65-66.

Cairo, “I do not travel to escape from my sorrow, but to learn to bear it more patiently.”⁴²

Around this time, Taylor was also, in his own words, “threatened with an affection of the throat.”⁴³ Based upon his “previous experience of a tropical climate,” Taylor believed a trip to Egypt and the Orient, which he had up to this point always considered, would remedy the effects of his illness.⁴⁴

Beyond grief and illness, though, Taylor was, by this time, also overworked. According to his biographer, Albert H. Smyth, he was a vociferous writer, spending up to fifteen hours a day writing.⁴⁵ On top of that, he had his day-to-day work in the editorial room to keep him busy and keep him financially afloat. As Taylor proclaims in *Journey to Central Africa*, he was “exhausted by severe mental labor.”⁴⁶ He saw in the culture and lifestyle of the Orient a remedy for this situation. As Taylor put it himself, the Orient offered him:

[A] grateful release from the drudgery of the editorial room. After three years ... in an atmosphere which soon exhausts the vigor of the blood, the change to the freedom of Oriental life ... was like that from night to day. With restored health, the life of the body became a delight in itself; a kindly fortune seemed to attend my steps; I learned something of the patience and fatalistic content of the races among whom I was thrown, and troubled myself no longer with an anxious concern for the future.⁴⁷

Here was Taylor the romantic, who saw in the Orient not only an escape from the grind of modern America but also a vast landscape whose foreign and barbarous peoples could actually teach the civilized people of the world a thing or two about living but also, as we will soon see, about being a man.

⁴² Bayard Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Cairo Egypt (November 14, 1851), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, volume 1, 4th edition, edited by Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, 220-221 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1885), 221.

⁴³ Quoted in Smyth, *Bayard Taylor*, 97.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Journey to Central Africa*, 2; Hansen-Taylor and Scudder, eds., *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, volume 1, 219; Smyth, *Bayard Taylor*, 83-84 and 96-97; and Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor*, 42.

⁴⁵ Smyth, *Bayard Taylor*, 69.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Journey to Central Africa*, 2.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Smyth, *Bayard Taylor*, 97.

Elsewhere, Taylor expressed these sentiments in the L'envoi to *Poems of the Orient*, where he describes the Orient as a place of romantic and therapeutic escape. The poem begins by describing Taylor's departure from his travels. He bids farewell to "the Desert and the desert steed" as well as the sun and the palms. Despite having left them behind, Taylor notes how "from that life [his] blood a glow retains."⁴⁸ If the editorial room back home was "an atmosphere that soon exhausts the vigor of the blood," then the Orient was its remedy. A few stanzas later, Taylor continues to describe the therapeutic value of his travels:

I found among those Children of the Sun,
The cipher of my nature – the release
Of baffled powers, which else had never won
That free fulfilment [*sic.*], whose reward is peace.⁴⁹

Susan Nance argues that Taylor's experience traveling through the Orient not only offered an escape from civilization as well as poetic inspiration, but also helped him to further craft and market to American consumers the personality of an Eastern poet and rugged adventurer.⁵⁰ All this was, no doubt, true. However, there are moments in Taylor's poetry that suggest he believed these qualities – poetic inspiration, freedom and liberation, health and vitality, a new vigor for life – were not so much acquired *from* the East but rather that they were laying dormant within himself all along and he only needed the East to activate them. Taylor does not acquire peace *from* the Children of the Sun, to paraphrase the stanza above. Rather, he finds among them "the cipher of [*his*] nature" – the key to a mystery of which he already possessed. A similar sentiment can be read into Taylor's oft-quoted "The Poet in the East":

The Poet came to the Land of the East,
When Spring was in the air ...
And the Poet knew the Land of the East –

⁴⁸ Bayard Taylor, L'envoi to *Poems of the Orient*, 160-161 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), 160.

⁴⁹ Taylor, L'envoi to *Poems of the Orient*, 161.

⁵⁰ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 68-69.

His soul was native there.⁵¹

Taylor expresses his knowledge of and comfort with the East by claiming an indigenous relationship between the locale and his soul.

Taylor more explicitly investigates the possibility of a blood connection to the region in “The Palm and the Pine,” a poem published in the *New York Saturday Press* in 1859. Set during the time of the First Crusade (1095-1099), “The Palm and the Pine” tells the story of the child of an interracial romance between a Norseman and an Arab maid.⁵² While Taylor wrote the majority of the poem in the third person, exploring the lives and tribulations of the interracial family, he concludes with the following lines of which the last switches voice to the first person:

For, as the fountain disappears,
To gush again in later years,

So hidden blood may find the day,
When centuries have rolled away;

And fresher lives betray at last
The lineage of a far-off Past.

The nature, mixed of sun and snow
Repeats its ancient ebb and flow:

The children of the Palm and Pine
Renew their blended lives – in mine.⁵³

Whereas “Poet of the East” explores a metaphysical connection between soul and eastern locale, “Palm and Pine” suggests a racial connection.⁵⁴ Whether Taylor actually had or even truly

⁵¹ Bayard Taylor, “The Poet in the East,” in *Poems of the Orient*, 19-21 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), 19.

⁵² Interestingly, poems like “The Palm and the Pine” had their historical roots during the actual Crusades, when Catholic Europeans would explore themes of cross-cultural or inter-religious romance with the local populations of the Holy Land. Hsu-Ming Teo traces the cultural and historical origins of *The Sheik* and nineteenth century desert romance literature to these Medieval European romance ballads (Teo, *Desert Passions*, 27-37). Whether Taylor was aware of this history is unknown.

⁵³ Bayard Taylor, “The Palm and the Pine,” *New York Saturday Press* (January 29, 1859): 4.

⁵⁴ Taylor’s allusion to having a distant blood relation from the Orient is reminiscent of Edith M. Hull’s revelation of Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan’s racial pedigree: “[H]e is the son of one of your English peers. His mother was a Spanish lady; many of the old noble Spanish families have Moorish blood in their veins, the characteristics crop up even

believed his veins contained the “hidden blood” from the “lineage of a far-off Past” is beyond the point. The fact remains that he wrote about it and the trope itself – whether true, imagined, or just poetic allusion – further served him in the construction of himself as a poet of the East and an adventurous American traveler.

Taylor, however, was more than a romantic poet-adventurer in his travels abroad. He was, after all, being paid to publish his observations in newspapers back home. Greeley’s *New York Tribune* was the primary beneficiary of Taylor’s letters. However, Greeley also reserved the right to sell this body of work to other papers, which he did.⁵⁵ There were also the travelogues to be written back home and, of course, lectures to give while on the lyceum circuit. And while Taylor’s travel writings did contain their fair share of romanticism, they also took on a more sober and ethnographic voice. In *A Journey to Central Africa*, for instance, Taylor romanticizes the local inhabitants, proclaiming his “desire to participate in their free, vigorous, semi-barbaric life.” On the same page, however, he also declares, “While seeking to give correct pictures of the rich, adventurous life into which I was thrown, I have resisted the temptation to yield myself up to its more subtle and poetic aspects.” Yes, Taylor admits, the journey may have been “rich [and] adventurous” and the inhabitants were “free, vigorous, and semi-barbaric,” but the objective was always to “furnish a faithful narrative of [his] experience” and, as we will see shortly, to understand the Orient on its own terms.⁵⁶ As Taylor wrote to his publicist, James T. Fields, “I determined to taste the Orient as it was, in reality, not as a mere outside looker-on.”⁵⁷

after centuries. It is so with Ahmed, and his life in the desert has accentuated it.” See: Edith M. Hull, *The Sheik* (1919/1921) (Charleston: Biblio Bazaar, 2007), 179.

⁵⁵ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 66.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Journey to Central Africa*, 2.

⁵⁷ Bayard Taylor, Letter to James T. Fields from Constantinople (July 14, 1852), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, vol. 1, 4th edition, edited by Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, 231-233 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1885), 232.

And so, on August 28, 1851, Taylor sailed from Philadelphia to Alexandria, Egypt, arriving on November 4. From there, Taylor made his way to Cairo, where he departed on a journey up the Nile River that would take him as far as Ethiopia. Upon returning down the Nile to Cairo, he went back to Alexandria and departed by boat to Beirut in modern day Lebanon. From there, he and his fellow travelers went south down the coast of Palestine to Jerusalem, Jericho, and the Dead Sea. Eventually Taylor headed north again, through Palestine, Syria, and finally into Anatolia.

Almost immediately upon arrival in Cairo, Taylor, like many other European and American visitors to the region, began to makeover his appearance, dressing in local garb, growing out his beard, and sporting weapons at his side. This practice was clearly a central component to Taylor's experience abroad as he comments upon it frequently in his travelogues, poetry, and personal correspondence. He described not only the fashionable accessories of what he often labeled the "Oriental costume," but also of his increasingly tanned skin and growing knowledge of the Arabic language. Shortly after his arrival in Cairo, Taylor wrote his mother to describe this transformation:

I have already picked up considerable Arabic ... I am going to don the red cap and sash, and sport a sabre [*sic.*] at my side ... Think of me as having no hair, a long beard, and a copper-colored face ... I wear no cravat, and shall get an Egyptian shirt which is open at the neck and has no collar.⁵⁸

Taylor described himself similarly in a letter to his publicist James T. Fields:

If you think of me now, picture me to yourself as brown as an Arab, with a long beard, a red cap and white turban, a big shawl around my waist, and red slippers on my feet. I have quite a smattering of Arabic and can swear by Allah with the true Moslem function.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Cairo (November 14, 1851), 221.

⁵⁹ Bayard Taylor, Letter to James T. Fields from Alexandria, Egypt (April 12, 1852), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, 229.

For Taylor and other nineteenth century European and American travelers, dressing as a local was a common practice that served a variety of purposes. Some of these functions were primarily utilitarian. Taylor, for instance, told his mother that the “Egyptian dress is very cool and pleasant.”⁶⁰ Moreover, dressing as a local could help one avoid some of the inconveniences specific to a journey through the Orient. It was a common practice in this period for the Bedouin, who often controlled roadways and travel routes, to charge money to foreigners. This was, in part, because the Bedouin could serve as guides for one’s journey. But the intrepid foreign adventurers were also paying both for protection from other Bedouin tribes as well as insurance that the tribe they had employed would not rob them. By dressing in local garb, some Americans were able to evade paying tribute to the Bedouin highwaymen.⁶¹ In *Lands of the Saracen*, Taylor notes that on the road from Damascus to Iraq “[t]he traveler is obliged to go in Arab costume” to avoid the aggressive heat and equally aggressive Bedouin tribes along the route.⁶²

Having the ability to pass as a local also served Taylor’s ethnographic mission “to give correct pictures of Oriental life and scenery” as it allowed him access to places he may not have been able to enter were he not in disguise.⁶³ Taylor, for instance, donned Bedouin garb in Egypt to gain access to a forbidden town which hosted a group of Sufi dervishes. When the village guards initially refused Taylor entrance, his guide reportedly informed them that the disguised American was ““an Effendi who had just arrived, and must visit the mollahs to-night”” at which point the guards permitted him entrance.⁶⁴ In a letter to his publicist, Taylor not only boasted of his ability to pass but also how this often granted him access to forbidden locales:

⁶⁰ Bayard Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Upper Egypt (December 11, 1851), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, 223.

⁶¹ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 67.

⁶² Taylor, *Lands of the Saracen*, 186-187.

⁶³ Taylor, *Lands of the Saracen*, vi and Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 66-67.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Journey to Central Africa*, 100-101.

If you could see me now you would swear I was a disciple of the Prophet ... I wear the tarboosh, smoke the Persian pipe, and drop cross-legged on the floor ... When I went into my banker's they addressed me in Turkish. The other day, at Brousa, my fellow-Mussulmen indignantly denounced me as damned, because I broke the fast of Ramazan by taking a drink of water in the bazaar. I have gone into the holiest mosques in Asia Minor with perfect impunity. I determined to taste the Orient as it was, in reality, not as a mere outside looker-on, and so picked up the Arabic tongue, put on the wide trowsers, and adopted as many Eastern customs as was becoming to a good Christian.⁶⁵

Dressing as a local, however, also played into Taylor and his readership's romantic notions of self-discovery and liberation from the confines of civilization, highlighting the therapeutic value of barbarian virtues to those who perceived a dwindling Anglo American masculinity.⁶⁶ Taylor explicitly makes this argument towards the end of *Lands of the Saracen*:

We have safely passed through the untravelled [*sic.*] heart of Asia Minor, and are now almost in sight of Europe ... We are no longer happy nomads, masquerading in Moslem garb. We shall soon become prosaic Christians, and meekly hold out our wrists for the handcuffs of Civilization. Ah, prate as we will of the progress of the race, we are but forging additional fetters, unless we preserve that healthy physical development, those pure pleasures of mere animal existence, which are now only to be found among our semi-barbaric brethren. Our progress is nervous, when it should be muscular.⁶⁷

The transformation of Taylor from white "prosaic Christian" to tanned and semi-barbaric Muslim Arab, therefore served as a critique of Western Civilization's notions of progress, which was encouraging too many "fetters" and neuroses at the expense of "healthy physical development" and "muscular" masculinity.

The image of Taylor-as-local was also visually exhibited to Americans. In August 1854, a daguerreotype portrait of Taylor was engraved in *Putnam's Magazine*. The image features Taylor from the waist up, wearing the baggy pants, loose shirt, and buttoned jacket. His beard is

⁶⁵ Taylor, Letter to James T. Fields from Constantinople (July 14, 1852), 232.

⁶⁶ Edwards, *Noble Dreams - Wicked Pleasures*, 120 and Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 67.

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Lands of the Saracen*, 310-311.

full and skin appears to be tan. Atop his head is the turban and his right hand clutches a sheathed saber, perhaps the same one he told his mother about after arriving in Cairo. He looks up and gazes off into the distance. Being published in *Putnam's*, a monthly journal of literature, science, and art, the image would have reach Taylor's primary audience of educated upwardly mobile Anglo Americans.⁶⁸

This same cohort would have also more than likely been aware of Thomas Hicks' 1855 oil on canvas portrait of Taylor, which in addition to being featured in the 1856 National Academy of Design was reprinted and sold in bulk, becoming a "familiar household object ... which thrilled a generation of prosaic Americans."⁶⁹ The portrait depicts a bearded and tan Taylor reclining against several pillows on a flat rooftop overlooking a lush vista with a city in the background and snow-capped mountains even further off. The clothing he wears in the image are an exact match to an outfit that Taylor described to his mother:

[A] green embroidered jacket, with slashed sleeves; a sort of striped vest, with a row of about thirty buttons from the neck to the waist; a large plaid silk shawl as belt; white baggy trowsers [*sic.*], gathered at the knee, with long, tight-fitting stockings and red morocco shoes.⁷⁰

In Hicks' painting, Taylor is seated cross-legged atop an Oriental rug, smoking a Persian pipe and wearing a white turban. A curved, sheathed saber and two dueling pistols lay nearby. In the image, Taylor has presumably just eaten or taken his tea, as a darker skinned servant is seen leaving the rooftop with a tray in hand.

The presence of the dark servant in the image is worth looking at in some detail as it signals to the informed observer the oftentimes complex relationship that Taylor had to the

⁶⁸ Edwards, *Noble Dreams - Wicked Pleasures*, 35 and 121 and Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 75-77.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 77.

⁷⁰ Bayard Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Upper Egypt (December 11, 1851), 223.

region and its inhabitants. On a purely superficial level his presence not only shores up racial hierarchies but also reminds viewers that the Orient – its locale, its aesthetics, and its people – were there to figuratively and literally *serve* as the backdrop from which Taylor and his readership constructed their own personal fantasies and exotic identities.⁷¹

It is worth mentioning, however, that the man serving Taylor in the painting is not a stock figure from Hicks' Orientalist repertoire, but rather Achmet, the Egyptian dragoman (guide) who had accompanied Taylor throughout his entire journey in Africa. In 1855, Taylor had apparently met a man in Massachusetts who had also employed Achmet and happened to be carrying a daguerreotype of the Egyptian guide. Taylor made a copy and then implored Hicks "to put Achmet into [his] picture."⁷² Achmet was with Taylor for the entirety of his journey along the Nile and is featured prominently throughout *Journey to Central Africa*. The servant in the image, then, was somebody with whom Taylor had a personal connection that warranted his inclusion in a painting that was ostensibly about Taylor.

Interestingly, it was Achmet who provided Taylor with the specific clothes he was wearing in the painting.⁷³ Taylor's decision to include him in the painting, then, might be read as a sort of homage or thank you to the man who played a role in providing him the wardrobe so central to his Oriental identity. Yet, it is clear that Taylor also formed a genuine bond with his guide and that he not only respected his professional reputation but also simply enjoyed his companionship. To his mother, Taylor had nothing but positive things to say about Achmet. At the beginning of his journey, he assured her that his guide "is one of the best in Egypt ...

⁷¹ Edwards, *Noble Dreams – Wicked Pleasures*, 120-123 and Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 77.

⁷² Bayard Taylor, Letter to His Mother from New York (November 16, 1855), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor*, 309.

⁷³ Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Upper Egypt (December 11, 1851), 223.

Acquainted with many of the government officials ... [and] speaks English and Italian very well.”⁷⁴ “My dragoman is a man who makes himself respected everywhere,” Taylor informed his mother in another correspondence, “and makes the Arabs respect me. He always speaks of me to them as ‘His Excellency.’”⁷⁵ Taylor may have, in part, found the guide so endearing because he treated his employer with the respect and admiration befitting an Anglo American traveler. However, he also seemed to admire the respect that Achmet himself commanded with other Arabs and government officials. It was clear that Taylor developed something akin to a friendship with Achmet. He expressed his desire for such a relationship early in his journey, writing to his mother that Achmet “understands the desert thoroughly, and will be not only a protection, but a sort of companion.”⁷⁶ When Taylor returned to Egypt in 1874, he wrote to American artist George H. Yewell, “My old dragoman of twenty-two years ago, Achmet, is alive ... He was overjoyed to see me again, and looks after us like a father.”⁷⁷

The inclusion of Achmet in Hicks’ oil painting, therefore, serves as a reminder of Taylor’s complex relationship to the Orient. On the one hand, the dark servant confined to the edges of the canvas was, in reality, Taylor’s respected companion along the Nile. Yet, Achmet’s presence, as others have argued, acts as a visual representation of the myriad ways that the Orient was served up to the imaginations of eager Anglo Americans looking for adventures and exotic self-transformation. Taylor’s relationship to the Orient was, to borrow a phrase from Eric Lott, one marked by “love *and* theft.”⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Cairo (November 14, 1851), 221.

⁷⁵ Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Upper Egypt (December 11, 1851), 223.

⁷⁶ Taylor, Letter to His Mother from Cairo (November 14, 1851), 221.

⁷⁷ Bayard Taylor, Letter to George H. Yewell from the Hotel Du Nil, Cairo (March 20, 1874), reprinted in *Life and Letters of Bayard Taylor* (1884), vol. 2, 5th edition, edited by Marie Hansen-Taylor and Horace E. Scudder, 647-649 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1895), 648.

⁷⁸ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), 20th anniversary edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

A similar dynamic of admiration and appropriation was present in his engagements and descriptions of desert Bedouin and Arab sheiks. In his translation of the Arabic poem, “The Arab Warrior,” we see the familiar celebration of Bedouin horsemanship, combat skills, and humility. The Arab warrior, for instance, describes himself as “the terror of the strong, / The helper of the weak. This is a man who “steer[s] [his] horse through stormy fights.” He is “the latest laid to rest, / The earliest in the fight.” While others are content to “idly feast” and divide booty, the Arab warrior takes pride in his poverty, enjoying the simple pleasure of polishing the harness on his horse.⁷⁹

Taylor explores the common nineteenth century trope of Arab horsemanship further in “Hassan to His Mare.” In the poem, the narrator, Hassan, heaps loving praise upon his horse with whom he also shares his food. In the opening stanza, Hassan calls to his mare:

Come, my beauty! come, my desert darling!
On my shoulder lay thy glossy head!
Fear not, though the barley-sack be empty,
Here’s the half of Hassan’s scanty bread.

In addition to bread, Hassan also shares his dates and water with the horse, for it is in her that his “strength and safety lie.”⁸⁰

A passage from *Journey to Central Africa*, indicates that Taylor saw in Arab horsemanship something of the liberty, adventure, and manliness that some nineteenth century Anglo American males were in search of. Taylor recounts a horseback ride to Luxor, Egypt in which he races against his Bedouin guide “merely for the delight of it.” The innocent competition began when Taylor’s guide “began to show his Bedouin blood by dashing at full

⁷⁹ Bayard Taylor, “The Arab Warrior (From the Arabic),” in *Poems of the Orient*, 39-40.

⁸⁰ Bayard Taylor, “Hassan to His Mare,” in *Poems of the Orient*, 114.

gallop.” Taylor, in return “became infected with a lawless spirit that could not easily be laid,” and the two set off to race one another.⁸¹

Such romantic Orientalist notions, however, did not preclude criticism when Taylor encountered Bedouin and sheiks who did not meet his expectations. One such instance occurred when he and his companions set out from Jerusalem to embark upon an excursion east of the city toward the Dead Sea. Before their departure from Jerusalem, the party was obliged to meet with “the Shekh el-Arâb (of the Bedouin), and the Shekh el-Fellaheen (of the peasants, or husbandmen).” As Taylor notes, these two sheiks controlled the roadways east from the city and “each traveler [*sic.*] is obliged to pay one hundred piastres for an escort.”⁸²

It is obvious from his writings that Taylor saw their service as a scam, partly to be blamed on the Ottoman Pasha who allowed and benefited from it, but also the result of the depravity of the two Arab sheiks. As Taylor notes, the escort “is, in fact, a sort of compromise, by which the shekhs agree not to rob the traveller, and to protect him against other shekhs.” Taylor, however, does not believe that the road out of Jerusalem is as dangerous as the reigning sheiks declare:

If the road is not actually safe, the Turkish garrison here is a mere farce, but the arrangement is winked at by the Pasha, who, of course, gets his share of the 100,000 piastres which the two scamps yearly levy upon travellers.⁸³

Taylor not only implies that the sheiks were corrupt, but also that they were lazy: “We left the city yesterday morning ... Neither of the sheiks made his appearance, but sent in their stead three Arabs, two of whom were mounted and armed with sabres and long guns.”⁸⁴ Moreover, the sheiks’ men prove to be terribly ineffective at their job and do not live up to their reputation as

⁸¹ Taylor, *Journey to Central Africa*, 142-143.

⁸² Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen*, 60.

⁸³ Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen*, 60-61.

⁸⁴ Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen*, 61.

fierce and brave warriors. As the party made its way into the Jordan Valley, they entered into the territory of a notorious gang of “robber Arabs.” Afraid for their own safety, the Arab escorts placed the travelers at the front of the caravan “as a forlorn-hope [to] secure their own retreat in case of an attack.” Taylor, however, was not terribly worried as he and his fellow travelers “were well armed, and had never considered [the Arab escorts’] attendance as anything more than a genteel way of buying them off from robbing us.”⁸⁵ To add insult to injury, Taylor notes that while camping near Jericho, he graciously offered the Arabs some tobacco. The escorts “manifested their gratitude by stealing the remainder of [the tobacco] during the night.”⁸⁶

Despite this experience, Taylor continued to romanticize Arabs and Sheiks, no more so than when he returned home and went on tour to promote his books. A review from his January 1854 lyceum lecture to the New York City Mechanics’ Society, saw him falling back not only upon a romantic Orientalism but also commonly held racial beliefs, which held biology and environment as the primary determinants of social identity. This particular lecture used these modes of thought not only to present the desert as a place of liberation and self-discovery, but also, and perhaps more interestingly, to deflate negative stereotypes about Arabs, appealing to the tradition of *ex oriente lux*.⁸⁷

In his lecture, Taylor made sure to specify that he would be talking about the nomadic Bedouin Arabs as opposed to the sedentary *fellaheen* who have “contented themselves with the humbler pursuits of agriculture.” Whether intentional or not, the choice to focus his discussion upon the Bedouin allowed Taylor to wax romantically about his time in the desert, a sentiment not lost in the *New York Times* review of the lecture: “In its freedom, its expansion, and its

⁸⁵ Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen*, 67.

⁸⁶ Taylor, *The Lands of the Saracen*, 69.

⁸⁷ Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 70-73.

solitude, the desert resembled the oceans; but it was blessed with even a purer and moralistic air - as sweet and refreshing as that which the first man breathed on the morning of creation.” In addition to echoing the romance of desert travel, the *New York Times* repeated Taylor’s challenge of negative stereotypes about barbarous, violent, and cruel Arabs. Reflecting upon the influence of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Barbary captivity narratives, specifically William Riley’s *Authentic Narrative of the Lost of the Brig Commerce* (1817), the *New York Times* review declared:

Probably no people had suffered more than the Arabs from one-sided judgement We had been taught to consider them as an outcast race ... The Arab of our school-boy days was a lean, haggard ogre, with fierce black eyes and a sharp scimitar in his hand, ready to cut off the heads of the unfortunate Capt. Rileys who might happen to fall into his power.

From there, the review proceeds to reveal Taylor’s more refined opinion:

The genuine Arab was by nature brave, fearless, generous, intense in his loves and hates, and keenly susceptible to the influence of the three Eastern Muses – Poetry, Music, and the Dance. His sense of honor – according to his standard, which might differ somewhat from ours – was irreproachable⁸⁸

Regardless of whether Taylor’s descriptions of Arabs were flattering or denigrating, romantic or merely observational, he was, nonetheless, always in a position of what Edward Said refers to as “flexible positional superiority.” Said here is highlighting the ways in which European and American authors, as the masters of their own narratives, had the privilege to write themselves into “a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing ... the relative upper hand.”⁸⁹ This does not mean we should doubt the sincerity of the individual observations Taylor made of locals while traveling abroad. But rather, that they were, however diverse, one facet of his privileged relationship to the region. In other words, the depiction of the

⁸⁸ “The Arabs (By Bayard Taylor),” *New York Times* (January 21, 1854), 3.

⁸⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

Oriental Other in Taylor's body of work cannot be divorced from the personal narrative and self-image he was constructing in his observations, poetry, travel writing, correspondences, and lectures. We detect throughout his work a desire to get something from the Orient: restitution from the grief of losing his wife, a homeopathic remedy for his throat affliction, liberation in the desert from the confines of Western Christian civilization, adventure and a renewed investment in rugged masculinity, as well as romantic love and the gratification of sexual desire as explored below.

While the themes of romantic love and sexual desire were perhaps one of the most popular tropes within the canon Orientalism, they made few appearances in Taylor's writing.⁹⁰ When they did, however, Taylor chose to explore these topics in a desert scene populated by Bedouin tribes and Arab sheiks. One poem in particular, "Amran's Wooing" (1855), clearly helped lay the cultural grounds upon which later novelists and filmmakers would set their own desert romances in the decades to follow.

"Amran's Wooing" is a narrative poem which tells the story of a Western traveler's infatuation with and wooing of Mariam, the daughter of an Arab sheik. The tale has all the conventions of the historical romance novel of the later nineteenth century: love rooted in forbidden sexual desire, the daring rescue of the desired maiden from her captor, the adventurous escape from and ultimate vanquishing of the maiden's former captors. Unlike *The Sheik*, however, the miscegenation narrative of "Amran's Wooing" is far less racially ambiguous, shoring up Anglo male superiority rather than complicating it as Hull would do in her romance novel.

⁹⁰ Wermuth, *Bayard Taylor*, 22. For more on Orientalist tropes related to romance and sexual desire, see: Teo, *Desert Passions* as well as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 156-165.

The poem begins with the unnamed narrator – a Western traveler – espousing the pains of forbidden, unrequited love, his “mighty longings [and] tender fears” that have steeped his “strong heart in fire and tears.”⁹¹ The traveler appears to be bored with Western women, “[w]hose charms to every gaze are free.”⁹² Rather, he chooses to pursue love in the Orient, “[w]here envious veils conceal the charms / [t]hat tempt a Western lover’s arms.”⁹³ Soon enough, the Western traveler comes across Mariam, the daughter of Shekh [*sic.*] Abdallah. While lounging and smoking in the sheik’s tent, Mariam enters to serve tea. The narrator is immediately struck by her concealed beauty:

The shrouded graces of her form;
The half-seen arm, so round and warm;
...
The head, in act of offering bent;
And through the parted veil, which lent
A charm for what it hid, the eye,
Gazelle-like, large, and dark, and shy.⁹⁴

The narrator does not immediately act upon his emotions and as the night of revelry comes to its close, he heads back into the desert. Unable to think of anything but the sheik’s daughter, however, the Western traveler waits for her to come gather water at a nearby well where he offers her a gift of flowers.

The next day, the traveler returns to Shekh Abdallah’s tent and is again served tea by Mariam. When he notices one of the gifted flowers at the bottom of his tea cup, the traveler takes it to mean that Mariam shares in the attraction. At this point, he asks the sheik for Mariam’s hand

⁹¹ Bayard Taylor, “Amran’s Wooing,” in *Poems of the Orient*, 50.

⁹² Taylor, “Amran’s Wooing,” 52.

⁹³ Taylor, “Amran’s Wooing,” 50.

⁹⁴ Taylor, “Amran’s Wooing,” 55.

in marriage. Abdallah, believing that the man's desire simply stems from the "passing flame of youth," refuses.⁹⁵ Undeterred, the Western traveler offers Abdallah the following warning:

"No passing flame!" my answer ran;
"But love which is the life of man,
...
Oh Shekh, I hoped not thy consent;
But having tasted in thy tent
An Arab welcome, shared thy bread,
I come to warn thee I shall wed [thy daughter]
...
Guard her as thou mayst guard."⁹⁶

Shekh Abdallah, in his aged-wisdom, acknowledges the man's youthful passion and allows him to leave the desert camp on good terms so long as he never returns. Undeterred, however, the narrator hatches a plan to meet Mariam at the well so they can ride off into the desert together.⁹⁷

That night, Mariam comes to the well, clad in white robes. Exhausted, she collapses in the narrator's arms and the two finally share a "long, long kiss" before speeding off into the desert upon the narrator's horse, "a steed of Araby's most precious breed."⁹⁸ It is not long, however, before the two lovers hear the "eager cry" of Shekh Abdallah's men who are in pursuit and gaining.⁹⁹ While the chase lasts "[t]hrough the long hours of middle night," by sunrise it seems all hope is lost.¹⁰⁰ The narrator prepares for his last stand, dagger in hand, Mariam clinging to him, and the faithful steed by his side. Then, at the last moment, the narrator spots nearby the camp of a neighboring tribe that just so happens to be the mortal enemy of Shekh Abdallah. The pursuers fall back, and the lovers are free to escape.¹⁰¹ The poem concludes with

⁹⁵ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 60.

⁹⁶ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 61.

⁹⁷ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 62-64.

⁹⁸ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 53 and 65.

⁹⁹ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 66.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 66.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, "Amran's Wooing," 67.

the narrator coming through on the promise with which he threatened Abdallah earlier: “ ... I swear / No other bed than mine shall wear / Her virgin honors, and thy race / Through me shall keep its ancient place.”¹⁰² Mariam has born a son and the poem ends noting that Shekh Abdallah has reconciled with his daughter and her new family.¹⁰³

Taylor’s poem, “Amran’s Wooing,” very much reads like a traditional desert romance novel. In many ways it stands as a historical predecessor to E. M. Hull and Paramount Pictures’ *The Sheik* both of which, if produced in a different historical period, might have been far less controversial and just as popular with white men as Taylor’s work. But, in many ways, much had changed between the 1850s and the 1920s. Massive waves of immigration beginning in the late nineteenth century had culminated in the racially motivated Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Moreover, the activism of women and feminists throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had finally led to universal female suffrage in the U.S. with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. In this context, *The Sheik* mobilized white male fears surrounding both the influx of New Immigrants to the U.S. as well as anxieties over increased female autonomy and freedom. Here was a novel written by a woman for the express purpose of female consumption. Here was film which mobilized public female sexual desire for ethnic foreign peoples. This was doubly true when that Arab sheik turned out to be an ethnic Italian heartthrob named Rudolph Valentino. By the 1920s, then, the cultural power of representation over the figure of the Arab sheik had, seemingly, been wrestled from the hands of his traditional patrons – white, Anglo American males – and placed thoroughly in the hands of women and an effete and swarthy Italian immigrant who many Anglo American men believed exercised far too much control over their wives and daughters.

¹⁰² Taylor, “Amran’s Wooing,” 61.

¹⁰³ Taylor, “Amran’s Wooing,” 68.

Resentment towards Hull, Valentino, and *The Sheik*, however, never translated into a wholesale rejection of the Arab sheik by Anglo American males in the 1920s. In my next chapter, I demonstrate that in many ways, the Anglo American Arabophilia that predominated throughout the nineteenth century was very much still present in silent narrative cinema's adaptation of the desert romance genre. In fact, between the years 1909-1927, only *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* garnered massive waves of criticism from journalists and film critics. True, some may have leveled complaints about the over-saturation of sheik-themed desert romances on the film market, but ethnic prejudice and vitriolic hatred was reserved almost solely for Valentino and his two films. Moreover, chapter two will again deflate some of the historical significance invested in Hull's novel and Valentino's films by revealing how the genre conventions for the Hollywood desert romance were well in place by the time that E. M. Hull had published *The Sheik*.

CHAPTER II

A Romance Made in Hollywood: Desert Love, Arab Sheiks, and Questions of Race and Sex in Silent American Cinema, 1909-1927

In the opening scenes of film director Rupert Hughes' *Souls for Sale* (1923), recently-wed Remember "Mem" Steddon (Elanor Boardman) abandons her husband, Owen Scudder (Lew Cody), whom she hastily married in a "whirlwind courtship." The couple are aboard a train heading to Los Angeles, where an ocean liner awaits to take them on their honeymoon. When the train makes a routine stop to fill up on water at a remote desert station, Mem hastily sneaks off, leaving Owen behind. She travels across the California desert aimlessly from night into day. Nearly dehydrated, Mem stops, exhausted, at the base of a sand dune. Looking up, she sees a most unexpected sight: an Arab sheik, clad in the flowing white robes of a wandering Bedouin. The sheik dismounts his camel and races down to aide Mem, catching her just before she faints. Collapsed in the Arab man's arms, and more than a bit confused, Mem asks, "Are you real or a mirage?" "Neither," the sheik responds with a charming smile, "I'm a movie actor." As a title card informs the audience at one point in the film, Mem has unwittingly stumbled upon the production site of a Hollywood desert romance film in which "The *usual* sheik crosses the *usual* desert with the *usual* captive."¹

Released just two years after the premier of Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* (1921), this introductory scene from *Souls for Sale* humorously pointed towards the sheer abundance of

¹ Italics added.

sheik-themed desert romance films that saturated the American film market throughout the 1920s. By the early 1920s, then, the “usual” sheik film was deploying a set of narrative tropes and thematic elements to which American audiences had become quite accustomed. In 1922, one Hollywood trade journal would go so far as to declare, “If you have seen one [sheik film] you have seen them all. It can all be told in five words, Sheik, desert, girl, kidnappers, murder.”² In general, this comment was not far off the mark. Many sheik-themed desert romances from the period tended to follow a fairly rote and well-worn narrative plot, so much so that most scholarship agrees that they constituted their own cinematic genre, easily recognized by American film critics and audiences in the 1920s.³ Sometimes these films were referred to broadly as “Oriental subjects” or “desert stuff,” other times a film might be described as a “Sheik picture” or as belonging to the “Sheik class.”⁴ In any case, this body of work generally drew upon a standardized and recycled set of conventions and tropes familiar to the genre.

These productions, for instance, tended to feature an Arab sheik who abducts an independent but unsuspecting white woman travelling through the desert. The sheik then puts the white woman into a compromising position, whereby her womanly virtue is at stake. Sometimes she is raped or threatened with rape. Other times, the sheik attempts to force marriage upon the white woman who will either be his only wife or just the latest sexual possession in his ever-expanding harem. Despite his barbarity and racial otherness, the white woman, sooner or later, finds herself seduced by the exotic allure of the Arab sheik. Sometimes, she sees a tenderness hidden deep within the sheik and believes herself to be the only person who can bring it out of

² “Arabian Love,” Film Review, *Camera!* (July 1, 1922): 5.

³ John C. Eisele, “The Wild East: Deconstructing the Language of Genre in the Hollywood Eastern,” *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2002), 68-94 and Abdelmajid Hajji, *Arabs in American Cinema (1894-1930): Flappers Meet Sheiks in New Movie Genre* (United States: Self Published, 2013).

⁴ Hajji, *Arabs in American Cinema*, 33.

him. Other times, she is seduced by the sheik's brute, animalistic strength, characteristics that make him the only man capable of awakening in her the feelings of desire and love. At some point in the film, the prized white woman is captured or nearly captured by the chief of a rival desert tribe. The film's leading sheik rides into the desert, kills the bad sheik, and rescues the captive white woman. The romance often concludes with the grand revelation that the sheik is not, as believed, an Arab, but, in reality, a white man, making this a racially pure romantic coupling and narrowly avoiding the social taboo and legal quandary of miscegenation.

Central to the constitution of this film genre, then, was the topic of miscegenation. Desert romances, as noted in this dissertation's introduction, opened up a space whereby white women were encouraged, at least temporarily, to fantasize about what it might be like to have sex with and/or marry a non-white male. The repetitive stock endings of these plots, whereby the Arab sheik is revealed to be a white man in disguise, points towards how controversial this trope was. In the U.S., state laws banning interracial marriage were, after all, not declared unconstitutional until the 1967 Supreme Court case of *Loving v. Virginia*. In an era in which eugenic concerns about "race suicide" were rampant, it was for many Americans a white woman's duty to bear racially pure children.

Much has been written about the subject of miscegenation in *The Sheik* and, to a degree, films produced in the wake of its controversial success. However, we know decidedly less about the myriad films produced in the decade leading up to the watershed year of 1921. While scholars, like Abdelmajid Hajji (2013) and Hsu-Ming Teo (2012), occasionally recognize films produced prior to *The Sheik*, their analysis is either very cursory or they largely fail to recognize the significance of these earlier films in defining the parameters of the desert romance genre and its relationship to the topic of miscegenation.

Throughout this chapter, I explore the genesis and evolution of Hollywood's romance with the sheik-themed desert romance film, emphasizing how film producers dealt with the genre's flirtations with miscegenation in the period both before and after *The Sheik's* production. Because most of these films have been lost or destroyed, I rely heavily on Hollywood trade journals and mainstream American newspapers to reconstruct their plots. Moreover, I use these primary sources as a means to gain insight into the ways that film critics and industry producers engaged, firsthand, with the controversial topic of miscegenation that was so central to the film genre.

My research demonstrates how Hollywood strategies for dealing with miscegenation in silent era desert romance films evolved in three distinct periods between the years 1909-1927. The earliest desert romance films, for instance, held to a strict racial politics often through narratives in which white women were abducted by lecherous Arab males and rescued by a heroic white male savior. Beginning in 1912, however, Hollywood films devised several strategies through which the controversial topic of miscegenation could be broached without necessarily upsetting the racial sensibilities of American audiences. Some mobilized religious identity as a surrogate for race. *Fighting Dervishes of the Desert* (1912), for instance, featured a romance between a Muslim Arab male and a Christian Arab female to present a non-conventional interreligious coupling that would not necessarily disturb the racial sensibilities of its audience. Others, like Cecil B. DeMille's *The Arab* (1915), contained romantic plots between a white woman and an Arab man that ended ambiguously, never revealing whether or not the two had become a couple. Ultimately, however, it was the introduction of a stock character-type which I have labeled the "white sheik" that would prove most successful to Hollywood's flirtations with miscegenation for the rest of the period. Starting in 1919, numerous desert

romance films featured white women falling for Arab sheiks, only to reveal at the last possible moment that the sheik was indeed a white man disguised as an Arab. While this strategy ultimately failed to quell the outrage of offended white Anglo American males following the release of *The Sheik*, overall Hollywood's attempt to serve up racially safe miscegenation narratives in the period was a success. Not a single film in the period between 1909-1927 garnered near the amount of criticism that Valentino's *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* (1926) had received. In general, most complaints about cinematic desert romances from film critics were not about these films' racial politics but rather that that the genre had exhausted itself and was getting old, boring, unoriginal, or predictable. Overall, this chapter, like the previous, reveals that it was not necessarily the figure of the Arab sheik that provoked the ire of Anglo American men in the period between 1909-1927, but rather the fact that Valentino, an Italian immigrant, was being celebrated as a romantic sheik.

Strict Racial Barriers, 1909-1912

A decade before British author E. M. Hull would publish *The Sheik* (1919), American film producers were concocting desert romances of their own. Unlike Hull's novel, however, many of the earliest desert romance films produced between the years 1909-1912 refused to even flirt with the subject of interracial sex and romance. Instead, these early films upheld strict and explicit racial barriers throughout their entire plots. In these films, consensual romantic encounters were only allowed to exist between characters that were clearly and unmistakably identified as being racially white. The plots to these early films, like *Won in the Desert* (1909), *Into the Desert* (1912), and *Captured by Bedouins* (1912), centered around rescue fantasies that featured white men rescuing white women who have been captured by dark-skinned men. As

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994) demonstrate, historically, these types of narratives were common to Western European and American cultural productions. The primary threat to the female captive in these types of narratives was often, but not always, rape at the hands of her dark-skinned abductor.⁵

Selig Polyscope's *Won in the Desert*, for instance, features an American naval lieutenant who rescues Mabel, the daughter of a wealthy Chicago industrialist, from the clutches of Sheik Ahmet, the self-styled "King of the Desert." While Mabel is "brave ... and defiant," she ultimately depends upon the American lieutenant and his band of U.S. sailors to come to her rescue.⁶ "The Americans win, of course," noted *Variety*, and with Mabel rescued from Ahmet, she and the lieutenant promptly become engaged.⁷

Thanouser Film Corporation's *Into the Desert* builds upon a similar plot as *Won in the Desert*, again upholding the importance of racial purity via a narrative that features the rescue of a white female captive from an Arab sheik. *Into the Desert* follows an unnamed American woman (Marguerite Snow) who is traveling with her father (George Nichols) and fiancé (William Russell) through the Orient. Against the wishes of her fiancé, the American woman hires an Arab guide to escort her on an excursion into the desert. Soon after her departure, however, the guide turns the American woman over to a lustful Arab sheik (James Cruz) who "dare[s] to cast his eyes on a woman who [is] far superior to him." The sheik initially agrees to return his captive for a price. However, when the fiancé arrives at the camp to make the exchange, the sheik takes the ransom money and shoots the fiancé, leaving him injured and

⁵ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 156-162.

⁶ "Won in the Desert," Film Review, *Moving Picture World* (July 3, 1909): 103

⁷ Frank Wiesberg, "Won in the Desert," Film Review, *Variety* (July 17, 1909): 14.

incapable of rescuing his betrothed. Ultimately, it is one of the sheik's jealous wives (Viola Alberti) who helps the captive American woman escape.⁸

In addition to featuring yet another white female in need of rescue, the Kalem Company's *Captured by Bedouins* was also the first film to feature a white male character disguised as an Arab, predating Valentino's *The Sheik* by almost a decade. The movie begins aboard an ocean liner headed to Cairo where American Doris Barnet (Gene Gauntier) meets a "blase young Englishman" by the name of Lieutenant Greig (J. P. McGowan).⁹ Doris initially rejects Lt. Greig's proposal of marriage. However, that will change after she is captured by Bedouins and in need of rescue. While out in the desert, a gang of "prowling" Bedouin descend upon her "like a flock of vultures."¹⁰ Lt. Greig immediately takes off after Doris on horseback. To infiltrate the Bedouin camp, Lt. Greig attempts to purchase a disguise from an Arab passerby. When the Arab man refuses to sell his possessions, Lt. Greig knocks him out and steals his robes, head-wrap, and camel. Lt. Greig also sets his handkerchief on fire and uses the ash to darken his face and hands, "converting his fair English skin into a swartheness that would go unquestioned."¹¹ Lt. Greig infiltrates the camp and rescues Doris from her captivity. Grateful for her rescue, and true to the fashion of rape and rescue narratives, Doris has fallen in love with Lt. Greig.¹²

In 1912, J.P. McGowan, who played Lt. Greig in *Captured by Bedouins*, became the first Hollywood actor to dress the part of a white man disguised as an Arab onscreen. By this time, there was nothing particularly novel in American culture about a white man dressing as an Arab. As explored in chapter one, American men had been dressing the part since the mid-nineteenth

⁸ "Into the Desert," Film Review, *Moving Picture News* (April 6, 1912): 39.

⁹ "Captured by Bedouins," Film Review, *Kalem Kalendar* (June 1, 1912): 11.

¹⁰ "Captured by Bedouins," *Kalem Kalendar*, 11 and Leona Radnor, "Captured by Bedouins," Serialized Account, *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (July 1912): 72.

¹¹ Radnor, "Captured by Bedouins," 74.

¹² Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 138.

century. To many, the practice of dressing Arab was a central, and often celebrated, component of their travels throughout the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In travel literature and poetry, nineteenth century Anglo American men romanticized their adopted garb, reveling in the exoticism of this foreign encounter and seeing in the act of “playing Arab” a way to reassert their connection to a more primitive and athletic masculinity that many thought swept away by the forces of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization. Unlike these nineteenth century “white sheiks,” however, McGowan’s Lt. Greig hardly revels in his disguise. He adopts it late in the film and only as a means to rescue Doris from the clutches of her Bedouin captors.

Historically, Lt. Greig represented a transitional point for the figure of the “white sheik” in American popular culture. He was far cry from the nineteenth century romantic in search of masculine virtues in the body and garb of his racial other. Nor was he the sexually alluring character whom Valentino would come to embody in *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, films in which Arabness was built into the sexuality and danger of the romantic encounter. Conversely, at the end of *Captured by Bedouins*, Doris falls in love with Lt. Greig, but she does so “despite his blackened face” and full-well knowing that he is a white man.¹³ Unlike in later films, Greig’s racialized disguise was not intended to be a part of his sexuality.

Between 1909-1912, the desert in early Hollywood films, like *Won in the Desert*, *Into the Desert*, and *Captured by Bedouins*, was a place of intraracial romantic encounters whereby the threat of miscegenation was quelled either by a white male savior as in *Won in the Desert* and *Captured by Bedouin* or, in the case of *Into the Desert*, through the actions of a jealous Arab wife. Though *Captured by Bedouins* may have introduced the figure of the “white sheik” to American film audiences, his disguise was in no ways meant to trick the audience into thinking

¹³ Radnor, “Captured by Bedouins,” 74.

that a white woman was falling in love with an Arab man. The possibility of miscegenation was, simply put, off limits in these early films. By 1912, however, Hollywood began to flirt with the topic of miscegenation in ways that pushed against the strict racial boundaries that policed these early films' sexual politics. Moreover, the end of the decade would also see Hollywood again experimenting with the character of the "white sheik," eventually re-branding him as a sexually alluring but racially ambiguous white male in director Reginald Barker's *Flame of the Desert* (1919) and paving the way for Valentino's role as Ahmed two years later in *The Sheik*.

Early Flirtations with Miscegenation, 1912-1919

Whereas early desert romance films enforced a strict sexual barrier between races, between 1912-1919, Hollywood was emboldened to experiment with narratives that were more open to the possibility of miscegenation. This was, of course, a controversial subject, so film producers developed a number of strategies to navigate these romances. To be clear, a number of films, like *Tragedy of the Desert* (1912) and *The Road to Love* (1916) did feature white men seducing Arab women. However, such films would not have been terribly controversial. Social and legal bans on miscegenation, after all, were mostly in place to police the sex lives of white women as evidenced by the historically common rape and rescue narrative present within American and European cultural productions about white engagements with racially other peoples. As such, I will focus here on how sheik-themed desert romance films engaged with the more controversial romances between white women and Arab males.

In general, Hollywood producers deployed three strategies to navigate this difficult topic. Importantly, all three strategies flirted with the possibility of miscegenation without ever explicitly saying that is what was happening. The first approach used religious difference to

racially code a romance between two Arab characters. In *The Fighting Dervishes of the Desert* (1912), for instance, Islam is used to mark the male Arab as racially other and barbaric, while his female Arab Christian love interest is, much like Diana Mayo in *The Sheik*, the one person who can reform him and bring him closer to a genteel set of moral standards. The second approach to dealing with miscegenation, which is found in *The Arab* (1915), was to present an ambiguous ending that left the romance between a white female and an Arab male as a future possibility but not a definitive conclusion. Finally, by 1919, filmmakers would modify the character of the “white sheik” first introduced in *Captured by Bedouins*. When utilized strategically, films featuring the “white sheik” could present a miscegenation narrative between a white woman and Arab sheik that was made safe at the last possible moment with the revelation of the sheik’s true racial identity. This was the strategy infamously utilized in *The Sheik*, whereby Valentino’s Ahmed is ultimately revealed to be the orphaned child of a Spanish mother and British father, albeit with traces of Moorish blood. Hollywood, however, began to experiment with this type of veiled miscegenation narrative in 1919 with the release of *The Man Who Turned White*. Moreover, in the same year, Hollywood perfected its utilization of this trope in *Flame of the Desert*.

The Fighting Dervishes of the Desert was one of several Kalem Company productions filmed on location in North Africa between 1912-1914. Interestingly, many of these Kalem films featured narratives in which most, if not all, the characters were supposed to be Arab, even if many of the leading roles were played by white actors.¹⁴ Despite the film’s authentic location and focus on the lives of Arabs, *Fighting Dervishes of the Desert* has all the makings of a traditional desert romance. “You will see scores of camels and Arabian horses ... [and] a typical

¹⁴ Hajji, *Arabs in American Film*, 84-88.

Bedouin village,” noted the Kalem Company.¹⁵ The plot features a Muslim Arab sheik enamored with an Arab Christian woman who he is forbidden to love. Because the barrier of race is ostensibly not an issue in *Fighting Dervishes of the Desert*, the film utilizes religious difference not only to create dramatic tension but also, as I will later argue, imply a miscegenation narrative that viewers may read into the film should they choose to do so.

Throughout the film, Hassan Ali (J. J. Clark), a Muslim Arab sheik, is enamored with Zahrah (Gene Gauntier), the daughter of a Coptic priest. In a serialized version of the plot for *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, Montayne Perry highlighted Hassan’s “rapturous” gaze through which he “devoured [Zahrah’s] beauty.” Sheik Hassan is consumed by his lust for Zahrah. “For days,” noted Perry, “he dreamed of the graceful figured with the dark, mystic eyes and the sweet voice.” Despite the mutual interest between the two, the interreligious romance is presented as doomed from the beginning due to the supposed intolerance of Muslim Arabs. Zahrah’s Coptic tradition, noted Perry, “[S]urvives, in spite of the pitiless, age-old persecution at the hands of Moslem Arabs.” Zahrah’s father, as a result, declines Hassan’s request to marry the priest’s daughter. In response, Hassan works his band of desert-roving dervishes into a frenzy and vows to massacre the Coptic village. As the “frenzied mob of fanatics” makes their way into the village, however, the sheik begins to doubt the course of his actions. While it is too late for him to completely stop the massacre, he is able to find Zahrah, rescuing her and several other villagers. Zahrah forgives Hassan for his actions, and the two are wed after he converts to Christianity.¹⁶

¹⁵ “The Fighting Dervishes of the Desert,” Advertisement, *Kalem Kalendar* (April 13, 1912), 8.

¹⁶ Montayne Perry, “The Fighting Dervishes of the Desert,” Serialized Account, *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (June 1912), 42, 44, and 46.

The Fighting Dervishes of the Desert substituted religious for racial identity, thereby, explicitly avoiding the subject of miscegenation. Like racial identity in other desert romances, however, Hassan's religion still marks his character as a sexually alluring, but despotic and fanatical sheik who must be tamed by the grace of an Arab Christian woman. Given the desert romance genre's historical role as a cultural site whereby white women might engage in taboo sexual fantasies, however, one wonders whether the Kalem Company was using religion to construct a narrative in which white female Christian viewers might identify with Zahrah, turning the film into a sort of implied or disguised miscegenation fantasy. Whether or not white women interjected themselves into the role of Zahrah we may never know. However, given the narrative similarities between *Fighting Dervishes of the Desert* and Valentino's much more popular and well-documented sheik films, it would not be a stretch to conclude that some white women did indulge in miscegenation fantasies about Sheik Hassan.

Cecil B. DeMille's *The Arab* (1915), went one step further than *Fighting Dervishes of the Desert* and featured a Muslim Arab male converting to Christianity for a white woman, making it one of the first films to explore the possibility of consensual miscegenation. According to *Chicago Tribune* film critic Kitty Kelly, *The Arab* was the story of a "simple, earnest minded, aristocratic young Bedouin who love his horse and learns to love the lady."¹⁷ The young Bedouin is Jamil (Edgar Selwyn), son of the Sheik of El Khryssa. While traveling, Jamil meets and falls in love with Mary Hilbert (Gertrude Robinson), the American daughter of a Christian missionary. When Mary is captured by the Turkish governor of Syria and imprisoned in his harem, Jamil comes to her rescue and saves Mary just before she is about to be raped. To prove his love for Mary, Jamil converts to Christianity. Mary expresses some interest in Jamil.

¹⁷ Kitty Kelly, "The Arab," Film Review, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (June 16, 1915), 14.

However, by the end of *The Arab* she goes back to the U.S. with only a promise that she will one day return to Jamil.¹⁸

The Arab interjected an Arab character into the traditional leading role of the white European or American male who rescues the maiden from rape at the hands of her dark captor and ultimately wins her love. If the film was unique in this regard, its ambivalent ending, whereby Mary leaves Jamil but promises to return one day, suggests a lurking uneasiness over the prospect of a relationship between a white American woman and an Arab man, even one who has converted from Islam to Christianity. There were those, too, who doubted the sincerity of Jamil's religious conversion, a point that appeared in at least one review of *The Arab* and would resurface again when Rex Ingram remade the film in 1924.¹⁹

The final and, ultimately, most popular strategy by which Hollywood filmmakers flirted with the topic of miscegenation was via the character of the "white sheik." An early version of this character type had his debut in *Captured By Bedouins* in 1912, in which the American Lt. Greig disguises himself as an Arab to infiltrate an enemy Bedouin camp and rescue Doris, the film's captive white female. As previously discussed, however, because spectators witness his transformation, there was never any doubt as to Lt. Greig's racial identity in *Captured By Bedouins*. Moreover, Greig's proximity to Arabness is not a part of his sex appeal but rather detracts from it. Doris kisses him despite his blackened face not because of it. Lt. Greig was a far cry from the more controversial Ahmed Ben Hassan of *The Sheik*. Starting in 1919, however, Hollywood began to modify the character of the white sheik by delaying the narrative moment at which the sheik's true identity is revealed. By introducing an exotic Arab sheik who is only at

¹⁸ "The Arab (1915)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Film: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993* (2017), <https://catalog.afi.org> (accessed March 7, 2018) and Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), updated edition (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2009), 81-82.

¹⁹ "Edgar Selwyn in 'The Arab,' a June Lasky Film," *Motion Picture News* (June 12, 1915), 47.

the last possible moment exposed as a white man, Hollywood filmmakers could play with miscegenation narratives that were, ultimately, made safe by the revelation of the sheik's true racial background. We can see Hollywood still working out the specifics of this narrative trope and character type in the aptly titled *Man Who Turned White* (1919), which reintroduced the "white sheik" to American film audiences. However, it was, ultimately, Goldwyn Pictures' *Flame of the Desert* (1919) that would perfect the racially-safe miscegenation romance by coding the sheik's presumed racial identity as part of his sexual allure and prolonging the revelation of his true identity until the very end of the film.

Director Park Frame's *The Man Who Turned White* is the story of Ali Zaman (H. B. Warner), a "marauding Arab chieftain."²⁰ During a caravan raid, Ali spots Ethel Lambert, a "woman as white as moonlight." Sheik Ali abducts Ethel, dragging her back to his desert tent with the intent of raping and enslaving her. Before he is able to take her virtue, however, a rip in Ali's robes reveals skin that is "not brown and desert-colored, but as dazzling white" as Ethel's. Ali's captive faints and awakes later in his Arms, riding atop a horse. The sheik decides to take Ethel "back to her people" because he is "too much of a ... white man to keep [her]."²¹ With his racial identity exposed fairly early in the film, the sheik strikes up a romance with Ethel and returns to his old life as Captain Rand of the French Foreign Legion. Meanwhile, Jouder (Manuel Ojeda), a lecherous Arab from Rand's former band of desert marauders, abducts Ethel, whose virtue is once again threatened, this time by an actual Arab. To be expected, Rand and the Foreign Legion come to Ethel's rescue, saving her from the clutches of Jouder and quelling the threat of miscegenation.²²

²⁰ "H. B. Warner," *Picture-Play Magazine* (July 1919), 11.

²¹ Olive Carew, "The Man Who Turned White," Serialized Account, *Motion Picture Classic* (June 1919), 52-54.

²² "Hampton's New Production a Desert Story," *Motion Picture News* (May 3, 1919), 2859; "Robertson-Cole Announces New Brand," *Motion Picture News* (May 10, 1919), 3035; Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 345; and "The Man

While the white sheik's true racial identity is exposed fairly early, the transformation of Ali into Captain Rand was, as suggested by the film's title, a central theme of *The Man Who Turned White*. As Robertson Cole noted in *Motion Picture News*, "There is a mysterious flavor about [the film] that is going to arouse a whole lot of curiosity. How did he turn white? Why did he turn white?"²³ Several industry trade journals, moreover, encouraged theater owners to "play on the title" when advertising for the film, suggesting how exhibitors might do so in the lobbies of their establishments. *Moving Picture World*, for instance, encouraged exhibitors to paint an image of Capt. Rand with oil paints on oil-cloth, over which they would paint Ali Zaman in water colors, concealing the initial painting of Rand. A sign above the painted cutout might read: "'The Man Who Turned White.' 'Watch it change daily.'" Gradually exhibitors should wash away a small portion of the water-colored Ali, gradually exposing Rand's white skin "until a couple days before the showing [when] the last vestige of Ali Zaman has vanished."²⁴ An exhibitor out of Chicago deployed a similar gimmick when showing *The Man Who Turned White* at his theater. In the lobby was a life-size cutout of Ali with "his face browned by the desert sun." Concealed within the cutout was a flasher device that, when lit up, revealed Capt. Rand's "pure white" face.²⁵

Compared to *Captured by Bedouins*, then, *The Man Who Turned White* placed much greater emphasis on its protagonist's racial transformation. This historical and cultural shift marked an increased curiosity with the character type of the white sheik, though not necessarily for the purposes of titillating audiences with an interracial romance made safe only at the very

Who Turned White (1919)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Films: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993*, The American Film Institute (2017), <https://catalog.afi.com> (accessed March 7, 2018).

²³ Robertson Cole, "The Man Who Turned White," Film Review, *Motion Picture News* (May 24, 1919), 3468.

²⁴ Epes Winthrop Sargent and Walter K. Hill, "Booming 'Man Who Turned White,'" *Moving Picture World* (May 17, 1919), 1055.

²⁵ "Unique Exploitation Device," *Motion Picture News* (June 14, 1919), 3987.

last moment. It was, ultimately, Goldwyn Pictures' *Flame of the Desert* that would enact this final transformation, utilizing the exotically disguised white sheik as a means through which filmmakers might experiment with the taboo miscegenation narratives being made popular in that year by E. M. Hull's 1919 novel, *The Sheik*.

Flame of the Desert follows the trials and tribulations of Lady Isabelle Channing (Geraldine Farrar) and her brother Sir Charles Channing (Casson Ferguson). The film opens at a post-war London victory ball, where Lady Isabelle meets the attractive Sheik Essad (Lou Tellegen), a representative of the Egyptian delegation. Aware of the racial barrier between herself and the sheik, Lady Isabelle suppresses her desires for Essad. Shortly after the victory ball, Lady Isabelle follows her brother to Egypt on a diplomatic mission. Charles, who has a gambling problem, loses all his money to Aboul Bey (Macey Harlam), the leader of a group of anti-British Egyptian rebels. Isabelle accompanies her brother to Aboul Bey's tent to pay off the debt. When the lecherous Aboul attempts to rape Isabelle, she stabs and kills him but is unable to escape a mob of angry Egyptian rebels. Sheik Essad arrives in time to save Isabelle and the British Army puts down the rebellion. Essad finally reveals his true identity as an undercover English nobleman, freeing Isabelle to act upon her initial desire for whom she presumed was an Arab sheik.²⁶

Flame of the Desert was, therefore, the first Hollywood film to use the character type of the "white sheik" to explicitly flirt with the topic of miscegenation, presenting a narrative whereby a white woman's desire for an Arab male is eventually made acceptable by the final revelation of the sheik's true racial identity. Numerous advertisements and reviews played upon the presumed racial and religious barriers prohibiting Lady Isabelle from actively pursuing Sheik

²⁶ Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 223 and "Flame of the Desert (1919)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Films: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993*, American Film Institute (2017), <https://catalog.afi.com> (accessed February 18, 2018).

Essad. *Motion Picture News*, for instance, published a program for *Flame of the Desert* that used this tension as a way to titillate and entice viewers into seeing the film:

Lady Isabel [*sic.*] had met a handsome sheik and promptly fell in love with him ... What could it mean? Was this titled Englishwoman going to renounce her own race and marry an Egyptian? Impossible! Yet she followed him to the desert. She had heard the call of the Orient. What is revealed thereafter can be found in Geraldine Farrar's new picture, "Flame of the Desert."²⁷

The program, therefore, utilized the exotic allure of the Orient as a way to promote not only the film but its star actress as well. Moreover, part of that draw, according to *Motion Picture News*, came from finding out whether or not an Englishwoman would indeed fall in love with an Egyptian.

Other advertisements for *Flame of the Desert* also played up the supposed racial tension as a way to drum up interest. A different *Motion Picture News* ad, for instance, declared:

Egypt! And Revolution! Cairo and the Desert of Sahara for a setting! ... And through the glamour of it all, a daughter of the nobility, swept over the fateful barriers of religion and race by the impassioned love-making of an Egyptian - a Christian woman in love with a follower of Mahomet!²⁸

Similarly, the *Chicago Tribune* featured an advertisement that read: "An Englishwoman in love with an Egyptian - a Christian in the arms of Mohamet! – the age-old barriers of race and religion forgotten for one fleeting moment in the eternity of a fierce and forbidden embrace."²⁹

By 1919, then, all of the genre conventions of the sheik-themed desert romance were in place. Moreover, Hollywood developed a variety of strategies by which films might flirt with narratives of miscegenation. And while all of these conventions came together in *Flame of the Desert*, it was, ultimately, Paramount Pictures' 1921 adaptation of E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* that would be remembered as the progenitor of the numerous desert romance imitations that would

²⁷ Program Reader for "Flame of the Desert," *Motion Picture News* (November 8, 1919), 3502.

²⁸ Advertisement for *Flame of the Desert*, *Motion Picture News* (November 29, 1919), 3830.

²⁹ "Geraldine Farrar in 'Flame of the Desert,'" Advertisement, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (December 29, 1919), 13.

follow. Perhaps this was because, for reasons discussed later, both *The Sheik* as well as *Son of the Sheik* proved far more controversial than any of the films that preceded or followed them. Regardless, the rest of the silent period would become an era of “sheikmania.” As Herbert Howe jokingly noted in *Photoplay* magazine, “There are more sheiks [in Hollywood] than in the Sahara.”³⁰

Silent Desert Romance in the Era of Sheikmania, 1921-1927

Herbert Howe was not the only critic to take note of the sheer abundance of sheik-themed desert romance films following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921. Writing for *Motion Picture World*, for instance, Fritz Tidden noted in 1922

There seem to be more sheiks around now than you can shake a stick at. These warm blooded gentleman are enjoying wide popularity in both literature and pictures . . . As a matter of fact, the Arabian type of lover appears to have found unusual favor with picture patrons.

Tidden reiterated this observation in *Motion Picture World*, declaring, “The Arab has attained sudden prominence and Sheiks are over the place.” In both articles, he concluded by noting that “[d]esert sands were never hotter.”³¹ Moreover, *Exhibitors Trade Review* noted,

Of all story backgrounds none holds greater fascination than the vast silence of the desert. And no hero type in recent fiction has greater charm for the popular imagination than the turbaned, white-robed rider of the burning sands.³²

³⁰ Quoted in Emily W. Leider, *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 168.

³¹ Fritz Tidden, “The Sheik of Araby,” Film Review, *Moving Picture World* (May 13, 1922), 196 and “‘Arabian Love’: Desert Picture Full of Sheiks and Action is Released by Fox,” *Moving Picture World* (April 15, 1922), 761.

³² “Colorful Windows Ready to Serve You When You Play ‘The Arab,’” *Exhibitors Trade Review* (August 2, 1924), 35.

The *New York Times* made a similar observation, crediting *The Sheik* as the reason for this cultural phenomenon:

The picturization of Mrs. E. M. Hull's novel, 'The Sheik,' started a craze among film producers for Sahara photoplays in which the beguiling beauty of Anglo-Saxon maidens wrought havoc with the hearts of handsome Arabian chieftains.³³

So popular was the genre following the release of *The Sheik* that in 1922, Jesse D. Hampton Productions re-released their 1919 film, *The Man Who Turned White*, giving it a "magnetic [and] modern" new title: *The Sheik of Araby*.³⁴ The new title was taken from the 1921 *Sheik*-inspired hit song, of the same name, by Harry B. Smith, Ted Snyder, and Francis Wheeler. *The Man Who Turned White* was now, according to *Motion Picture News*, "The picture with the song title already on millions of lips!" Moreover, it was "backed by the popularity that all Sheik productions are now enjoying."³⁵

Despite the increase production of sheik-themed desert romances following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921, not much changed about the genre. "Desert sheiks of amorous propensities have figured largely in screen drama of late," noted *Exhibitors Trade Review* in 1923. The article went on to further comment how "these tales of wild doings in Arabia usually bear a strong family resemblance to each other so far as the general plot structure is concerned."³⁶ Rather than innovate, therefore, these films tended to recycle familiar tropes and plot structures from the previous decade. As with earlier desert romance films, miscegenation became a key theme around which these plots tended to unfold. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Grace Kingsley comically declared that "Arabian women of the desert had better unionize or they will find their

³³ "The Desert Humbug," *New York Times* (July 14, 1924), 11.

³⁴ R. W. "The Sheik of Araby," Film Review, *Camera!* (August 19, 1922), 5.

³⁵ "Real Exploitation to Help Thousands of Exhibitors Get the Money with 'The Sheik of Araby,'" *Motion Picture News* (May 13, 1922), 2246-2247.

³⁶ "One Stolen Night," Film Review, *Exhibitors Trade Review* (February 17, 1923), 627.

jobs all gone, if we may judge from the number of picture plays in which white ladies are stolen by desert Arabs.” Fortunately, according to Kingsley, “[T]here is always a nice gallant white man somewhere around who sees to it that nothing happens to disturb the chemical purity of the heroine when the villain attacks.”³⁷

As suggested by Kingsley’s comments in the *Los Angeles Times*, the primary way around which Hollywood flirted with the issue of miscegenation without actually crossing the color line was to incorporate the white sheik character type. The white sheik could be found in films like *Arabian Love* (1922), *One Stolen Night* (1922), and *A Son of the Sahara* (1924). Building upon the success of earlier pictures like *Flame of the Desert* and, of course, *The Sheik*, these films featured a barbaric Arab sheik enamored with the charms of a white woman who he romantically pursues. Only by the end of the film is it ultimately revealed that the Arab sheik is, in reality, a white European or American male, making the romance between the lovers racially safe and socially acceptable to mainstream American audiences.

Arabian Love was, as noted by *Variety* magazine, released in the wake of “the craze started by ‘The Sheik.’”³⁸ *Photoplay* announced that there would be “More sand, more caravans, and more Sheik” with the film.³⁹ Similarly, Fritz Tidden of *Moving Picture World* noted that the *Arabian Love* “is not only timely but supplies this avid public what it wants in Arabian stuff—love as warm as the climate, rescues, bad deeds finally frustrated, day and night riders over the burning sands and a very happy ending.”⁴⁰

The story follows Nadine Fortier (Barbara Bedford), who after months of taking care of her dying father, leaves home to finally be with her husband in the desert. On the way there,

³⁷ Grace Kingsley, “‘Arabian Love,’ is Hot Stuff at Lo,” *Los Angeles Times* (June 26, 1922): II 15.

³⁸ “Arabian Love,” Film Review, *Variety* (May 19, 1922), 41.

³⁹ “Arabian Love,” Film Review, *Photoplay* (June 1922), 62.

⁴⁰ Tidden, “Arabian Love,” *Moving Picture World*, 761.

however, Nadine's caravan is attacked by Bedouin Arabs, and she is abducted. The tribesmen compete for Nadine over a game of dice. The threat to Nadine's "life and honor" posed by the lecherous Arabs is cut short after she is won by Norman Stone (John Gilbert), an American fugitive who had taken up with the roving band of desert Bedouin.⁴¹ Much like Captain Rand in *The Man Who Turned White*, Norman decides to return Nadine to civilization where she discovers that her husband is dead. Soon after, the two strike up a short-lived romance, which is temporarily spoiled after a jealous Bedouin woman reveals to Nadine that it was Norman who killed her husband. Before she can turn him over to the police, however, Norman is able to give Nadine the full story. He had discovered that his sister was in an abusive relationship with Nadine's husband. When Norman confronted the man about it, the two got into a fight and Norman's gun accidentally went off, killing Nadine's cheating husband. Learning of her husband's infidelity, Nadine reunites with Norman, who gives up his life as an Arab so the two can return to the U.S.⁴²

While Norman's true identity is revealed early in *Arabian Love*, other films, like Vitagraph's *One Stolen Night*, withheld the moment of revelation until the last possible moment. The film begins with Diantha Eberly (Alice Calhoun) betrothed to Herbert Medford (Herbert Hayes), a man whom she does not love. Traveling to the Sahara with her parents to meet Herbert, Diantha is accosted by Arab beggars and rescued by a "dashing son of the desert."⁴³ Despite the perceived racial barrier, the two spark up a romance. However, Diantha is abducted by Sheik Amud (Russ Powell). Again, the mysterious desert Arab comes to her rescue, this time revealing

⁴¹ "Fox's 'Arabian Love' a Desert Romance," *Motion Picture News* (April 15, 1922), 2210.

⁴² "Arabian Love," Film Review, *Exhibitors Trade Review* (April 15, 1922), 1449; "Arabian Love (1922)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Films: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993*, American Film Institute (2017), <http://catalog.afi.com> (accessed March 9, 2018) and Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 85.

⁴³ "One Stolen Night," Film Review, *Motion Picture News Booking Guide* (April 1923), 80.

his true identity as her fiancé Herbert.⁴⁴ *Exhibitors Trade Review* found the revelation of the sheik's true racial identity to be "consoling," noting that, in the end, "the girl is won by a good American after all."⁴⁵ Cross racial desire was fine as a catalyst to reawaken Diantha's passion but only in so far as her desire for a man of another race is, in actuality, an artifice concocted by a white man disguised as an Arab sheik.

A similar theme plays out in director Edwin Carewe's *A Son of the Sahara*, which *Moving Picture World* described as "[e]ssentially a sheik picture and belonging to the class of those where the hero turns out to actually be a white man instead of an Arab."⁴⁶ The picture follows the story of Raoul Le Breton (Bert Lytell), raised from a young age as Cassim Ammeh by a desert Arab sheik. As an adult, Raoul studies at the University of Paris, where, assuming his true identity as a Frenchman, he meets and falls in love with Barbara Bier (Claire Windsor), a "beautiful English girl."⁴⁷ Soon, however, Raoul must return to the desert to assume leadership as sheik of his adoptive father's tribe, temporarily ending his romance with Barbara. Meanwhile, Barbara travels to visit her father, Captain Jean Duval (Walter McGrail), at his military outpost in the desert. Raoul and Barbara run into each other. However, Barbara reject Raoul, believing he had lied about his true racial identity back in Paris. Enraged that his love would mistake him for a member of a "dark race," Raoul decides "to use all the power he possesses as a Sheik to wring love from the girl."⁴⁸ He abducts Barbara, however, like other "white sheiks," Raoul

⁴⁴ "One Stolen Night (1923)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Films: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993*, American Film Institute (2017), <http://catalog.afi.com> (accessed March 9, 2018) and Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 383.

⁴⁵ "One Stolen Night," Film Review, *Exhibitors Trade Review* (February 17, 1923), 627.

⁴⁶ C. S. Sewell, "A Son of the Sahara," *Moving Picture World* (May 31, 1924): 497.

⁴⁷ "Romantic Drama Well Produced," *Exhibitors Herald* (April 26, 1924), 51.

⁴⁸ "Romantic Drama Well Produced," *Exhibitors Herald*, 51 and "Another Sheik Story," *New York Times* (May 27, 1924), 14.

ultimately decides to return Barbara back to her people. Soon after, she discovers that her abductor is indeed French, removing the racial barrier to their romance.⁴⁹

Films like *Arabian Love*, *One Stolen Night*, and *A Son of the Sahara* built upon earlier desert romances like *Flame of the Desert* and *The Sheik*, enticing audiences with miscegenation narratives that were ultimately made safe through the revelation of the sheik's whiteness. This plot had, by the release of *A Son of the Sahara*, become so commonplace that film critics could not help but point out the monotony of its presence. *Motion Picture Magazine*, for instance, described *A Son of the Sahara* as a film about a "hero ... who, of course, discovers in time for a happy ending that he isn't a sheik but a Frenchman."⁵⁰ Likewise, *Photoplay* offered the following sarcastic review of the film's plot:

Claire Windsor is the daughter of an English captain. She is made captive and taken to the *Sheik's* harem. Of course she falls in love with the *Sheik* and, of course, the *Sheik* turns out to be a white man, so nobody's feelings are hurt, least of all the *Sheik's*.⁵¹

According to *Photoplay*, then, not only was the revelation of the sheik's true racial identity a socially necessary plot device that smoothed over hurt feelings regarding the topic of miscegenation, but also by 1924 it was a device that was predictable and growing stale.

Not all sheik films produced in the 1920s, however, featured Arab sheiks who turned out to be white. Nonetheless, filmmakers continued to skirt around the issue of miscegenation, oftentimes reverting back to earlier cinematic strategies developed in the nineteen-teens. Such was the case in director Rex Ingram's remake of *The Arab* (1924), which like its predecessor,

⁴⁹ Mae Tinee, "Another Sheik Offered You in 'Son of the Sahara': And It's as Full of Thrills as the Original," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 22, 1924), 21; "A Son of the Sahara (1924)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Films: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993*, American Film Institute (2017), <http://catalog.afi.com> (accessed March 9, 2018); and Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 478-479.

⁵⁰ "A Son of the Sahara," Film Review, *Motion Picture Magazine* (September 1924), 57. Italics added.

⁵¹ "A Son of the Sahara," Film Review, *Photoplay* (August 1924), 89.

concludes its interracial romance on an ambiguous note so as to leave the issue open to interpretation. As far as the film's plot, Ingram did not stray far from that of the 1915 DeMille version. Jamil Abdullah Azam (Ramon Novarro), the estranged son of a Bedouin sheik, works as a dragoman in a Turkish city. There he meets and falls for Mary Hilbert (Alice Terry), the daughter of an American missionary. In an effort to woo Mary, Jamil promises to convert to Christianity. When the governor of the Turkish city threatens to massacre the local population, Jamil rouses the warriors of his father's tribe to ride to Mary and the others' rescue. After which, Jamil assumes leadership as sheik of the tribe. Despite having converted to Christianity and rescued her father's flock of converts, Mary returns to the U.S. but promises that she will come back for Jamil.⁵²

As with its predecessor, the ambiguous ending of Ingram's remake of *The Arab* leaves open the possibility of a future romance between Jamil and Mary while avoiding the immediate potentiality of miscegenation. Even without the ambiguous ending, however, several reviews commented that the romance between Mary and Jamil, which develops throughout the course of the film, was not very believable. *Photoplay*, for instance, noted the lack of romantic scenes between Mary and Jamil and described those that were supposed to be romantic as "meager." Moreover, both *Photoplay* and the *New York Times* expressed doubts about the sincerity of Jamil's conversion to Christianity, a move which was supposed to make him a more suitable match with Mary, despite his racial background.⁵³

⁵² "The Arab," Film Review, *Billboard* (July 26, 1924), 50; "The Desert Humbug," *New York Times*, 11; Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 81-82; and "The Arab (1924)," *AFI Catalog of Feature Films: The First 100 Years, 1893-1993*, American Film Institute (2017), <http://catalog.afi.com> (accessed March 10, 2018).

⁵³ "The Arab," Film Review, *Photoplay* (September 1924), 43 and "Last of the Sheik Films an Artistic Desert Creation," *New York Times* (July 20, 1924), X2.

In the era of sheikmania, it may have been novel for Jamil's character not turn out to be a white man "who was lost when he was an infant," as the *New York Times* made clear; however, for that non-white sheik to pursue a believable romance with a white woman was a line few wanted to see crossed.⁵⁴ Such was *not* the case with *The Sheik's Wife*, a French film that screened in the U.S. throughout 1922. When *The Sheik's Wife* made its way to American theaters, *Chicago Tribune* film critic, Mae Tinee, was compelled to remind readers that this was not a sequel to *The Sheik*.⁵⁵ Far from it, this foreign production was the only desert romance film to feature a consensual marital relationship between a white woman and an Arab man.

The Sheik's Wife follows Estelle Graydon (Emmy Lynn), a "blond English beauty who believed enough in the potency of romance to marry a Sheik."⁵⁶ The films Oxford-educated sheik, Hadjid Ben-Khalid (Marcel Vibert), balances his own customs with those of his wife. Despite living among his tribe in the desert, for instance, Hadjid promises Estelle that she will be his only wife. The two have a daughter, however, their failure to produce a male heir puts pressure on Hadjid's promise of monogamy. At the bequest of his tribe, he prepares to take a second wife. In response, Estelle attempts to run away. However, she is caught and locked away in Hadjid's harem. Later, after the sheik refuses to allow Estelle to visit her sick father, she reaches out to a former lover, Charles Courtney (Frank Medor), who is an officer at a nearby British garrison. Charles stages a rescue mission but is killed by Hadjid in a sword duel. The sheik's tribe retaliates against the British garrison but are annihilated in the process. With nothing to lose, Hadjid turns to suicide, but not before he tries to murder his wife first. The timely intervention of their daughter, however, averts the murder-suicide and reminds Hadjid

⁵⁴ "Last of the Sheik Films an Artistic Creation," *New York Times*, X2.

⁵⁵ Mae Tinee, "Being a Sheik's Wife Does Have its Drawbacks," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (April 28, 1922), 20.

⁵⁶ "French Film and English Star at Straud," *Exhibitors Trade Review* 11, no. 16 (no date), X.

that there is much for which he has to live. Hadjid and Estelle renew their love and take their daughter off into the desert to start life anew as family.⁵⁷

In its review of *The Sheik's Wife*, *Film Daily* warned viewers that “if they are anticipating an impassioned love story of the E. M. Hull variety, they are due for a big disappointment.”⁵⁸ In many ways, the film was the antithesis to many of the other desert romances hitting American theaters. First off, *The Sheik's Wife* was, indeed, anything but an impassioned romance. Estelle and Hadjid are beyond the lustful passions of youth and focused upon raising their daughter in a multicultural environment which challenges the stability of their marriage. Moreover, *The Sheik's Wife's* portrayal of a consensual interracial marriage stands alone among the corpus of films that strictly forbade miscegenation or skirted around the issue with ambiguous endings or grand revelations in which the sheik turns out to be a white man in disguise. And while Estelle, at one point, needs to be rescued by a white man, she, nevertheless, ends up with Hadjid by the end of the film.

Estelle and Hadjid's unconventional marriage is not without its consequences. Trapped in a harem, Estelle finds herself subject to her husband's native ways, which manifest despite his Western education and promises to remain monogamous. Moreover, their union indirectly results in the annihilation of Hadjid's entire tribe and the family's self-exile from both British and Arab society. Interracial marriage was possible in the desert, but the costs were high, a point which *Photoplay* understood as proof that such unions should be avoided: “The story proves that the two races can't mix - matrimonially speaking.”⁵⁹ Despite the film's presentation of an interracial

⁵⁷ Fritz Tidden, “‘The Sheik's Wife’: Real Atmosphere Raises Stereotyped Plot into Rather Vivid Melodrama,” *Moving Picture World* (March 18, 1922), 296; “The Sheik's Wife,” Film Review, *Exhibitors Trade Review* (March 18, 1922), 1145; and Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 458.

⁵⁸ “Sheik to the Title - It May Entice Them,” *Film Daily* (March 12, 1922), 3.

⁵⁹ “The Sheik's Wife,” Film Review, *Photoplay* (May 1922), 64.

romance, its ultimate message was that such a romantic coupling can only survive outside the bounds of civilization, hardly a ringing endorsement for miscegenation.

Conclusion

Cinematic interest in the Arab sheik and desert romance most definitely did not go away as Hollywood transitioned from the silent to sound productions in the late 1920s. Early experimental sound films like *The Desert Song* (1929) also recycled the familiar plots and tropes discussed in this period. In later decades, too, the sheik and the romance surrounding him would make its way into films like *The Road to Morocco* (1942) and *Harum Scarum* (1965). At the same time, however, there was a sense that the obsession with the Arab sheik was wearing itself thin following the release of *The Sheik* in 1921. When Jesse D. Hampton Productions re-released their 1919 production, *The Man Who Turned White*, as *The Sheik of Araby* in 1922, for instance, one film critic wrote in *Camera!* magazine, “The story is no different than any sheik or Arabian one, except that it was made three years ago before the turbaned ones wore out their welcome on the screen.”⁶⁰ The same year, another critic wrote about the sheer abundance of “feeble imitations of Valentino’s epic.”⁶¹ While others began to describe the saturation of desert romance films as an “epidemic.”⁶² There were so many sheik films by the early 1920s that when Fox release *Arabian Love* in 1922, *Motion Picture News* noted, “The story is so familiar that one may be excused for guessing the outcome from the start.”⁶³

⁶⁰ R. W., “The Sheik of Araby,” Film Review, *Camera!* (August 19, 1922), 5.

⁶¹ John Oscar, “The Sheik of Araby,” Film Review, *Motion Picture News* (August 26, 1922), 1024.

⁶² “Arabian Love,” Film Review, *Exhibitors Trade Review* (April 15, 1922), 1449 and Marion Russell, “Burning Sands,” Film Review, *Billboard* (September 16, 1922), 114.

⁶³ “Arabian Love,” Film Review, *Motion Picture News* (April 15, 1922), 2218.

Perhaps *Camera!* magazine summed up this fatigue with sheikmania best in its review for *Arabian Love*:

Different cast, different sets and different director is the only variation of “Arabian Love” from any other of the ‘Sheik’ pictures. If you have seen one of them you have seen them all. It can all be told in five words, Sheik, desert, girl, kidnapers, murder.⁶⁴

Yet, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, while many of the individual thematic elements may have been the same from one movie to the next, the manner in which those themes were deployed could differ from one film to the next. Between 1909-1927, silent film producers, mostly based out of Hollywood, experimented with a variety of thematic combinations. By mixing these themes in different ways, filmmakers developed a number of strategies for dealing with the issue of miscegenation, that controversial topic so central to the desert romance genre. While some of the very first cinematic romances outright denied consensual miscegenation, indulging in more traditional rape and rescue fantasies, as early as 1912 filmmakers were developing narrative themes and plot devices that would enable them to flirt with such a controversial topic. Some films, like *Fighting Dervishes of the Desert*, chose to explore narratives of interreligious romance between an Arab Muslim man and Arab Christian woman. Others, like Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Arab*, did feature romantic overtones between an Arab sheik and a white woman, but offered ambiguous endings whereby it was not certain that the two would get together as a couple. By 1919, however, both *The Man Who Turned White* and *Flame of the Desert* would introduce film audiences to, by far, the most popular strategy for dealing with the topic of miscegenation, a character-type that I have been referring to throughout this chapter as the “white sheik.” A romance between an Arab man and a white woman could be made racially safe by revealing at the last possible moment that the film’s sheik was not, in

⁶⁴ “Arabian Love,” Film Review, *Camera!* (July 1, 1922), 5.

actuality, an Arab but, rather, a white man disguised as an Arab. The white sheik was, of course, popularized two years later by Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* and became the preferred strategy for dealing with miscegenation in desert romance films for the remainder of the decade.

Despite the, mostly male, Anglo American backlash unleashed upon Valentino's *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, overall, Hollywood filmmakers had developed a set of narrative strategies throughout the silent era that were quite successful at dealing with miscegenation in desert romance films. As the popular press and industry journals from the period indicate, not a single desert romance film from the silent era had offended the racial sensibilities of Anglo Americans in the same way that Valentino's films had. Valentino's ambiguous racial status as an Italian immigrant in a period of U.S. history marked by anti-immigrant xenophobia, therefore, played no small part in mobilizing Anglo male hatred towards Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan. However, this did not translate into a hatred for all desert sheiks. When British actor H. B. Warner revealed his true identity in *The Man Who Turned White*, for instance, film audiences made no fuss about his initial deception of a white woman. The same could be said for *Flame of the Desert's* Sheik Essad, played by Dutch-born actor Lou Tellegan. The "true" identities below the robes of the Arabs they were disguised as were totally believable because the racial identities of the actors who played these white sheiks fit neatly into the racial category of whiteness that many Anglo Americans held in the period.

Up until this point, I have primarily been concerned with the attitudes of white Anglo Americans in relation to the figure of the Arab sheik. But what about non-white cultural producers and consumers? This topic, far less-explored in the abundant literature on Arab sheiks in American culture, is taken up in the next two chapters, which explore the varied ways that

Arab American and African Americans made meaning out of this cultural icon from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1920s.

CHAPTER III

“Deserts of Fact and Fancy”: Arab American Engagements with Exotic Sheiks and Desert Romance, 1876-1930

In September 1928 at the West 37th St. Manhattan County Jail, Marjorie Dorman, an ambitious and well-established “by-line girl” from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, approached the holding cell of Sheik Hadji Tahar ben Mohammed.¹ Tahar, an eighty-six-year-old Arab immigrant and naturalized American citizen was recently incarcerated for failing to make alimony payments to his estranged wife, Julia Tahar (Bekesy), from whom he had been separated since October of the previous year. He owed her \$775 dollars. “I have not this sum,” Tahar professed to Dorman. “Once, it is true, I was a man of means and many checks came in. But of late years, since my third wife took everything, I am dependent upon friends, and there are no more checks coming in.”²

While the conversation lingered, at moments, upon Tahar’s current marital predicament, Dorman was equally interested in the source of this bygone wealth. Tahar, it would seem, was a veteran of the many flourishing mass entertainment industries that had taken American and European audiences by storm in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Circuses, minstrel circuits, wild west shows, international exhibitions, theater, and cinema – you name it

¹ Evelyn Marsh, “Noted By-Line Gals got Start on Eagle: Ishbel Ross’ New Book Tells of Marjorie Dorman, Isabelle Keating, Grace Cutler of Other Years and Alice Cogan, With Us Now,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (September 22, 1936): 9.

² Marjorie Dorman, “Marry Girls of Your Own Religion, Advises 86-Year-Old Prince Tahar, as He Tells of His Three Romances; Only First Was Happy,” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (September 9, 1928): 10A.

and there is a good chance that “Sheik Hadji Tahar” as he was known in the business was somehow involved.³ In addition to identifying himself as a real-life sheik, Tahar also, rather boldly, proclaimed to have worked with Rudolph Valentino in Paramount Pictures’ *The Sheik* (1921). While the veracity of such a statement is hard to determine, what is clear from the historical record is that Tahar was a business-savvy exhibitionist with a genuine talent for showmanship. Even in his old age amidst the bleak, drab conditions of his imprisonment, Tahar never lost his flair for the theatrical: “As he talked,” noted Dorman, “the colorless, unenchanted walls of the jail faded out and color came, somehow into the atmosphere by the alchemy of his speech.”⁴ Such qualities were perhaps what enabled Tahar to adapt and thrive alongside the constantly evolving landscape of popular entertainment throughout the tenure of his business. Moreover, he proved remarkably adept at identifying and exploiting American fascinations with the Orient, exhibiting for audiences and procuring for business clients a broad array of performers, animals, sets, and props that could satisfy a growing consumerist desire for the “exotic East.”

Arab Americans, past and present, have always been more than just *passive* and *silent* victims of the structural conditions that have shaped their lives in the U.S. The exciting life and career of Sheik Hadji Tahar is just one example of the many and varied ways that Arab Americans were often *active* participants in the historical and cultural fascination with the figure of the sheik who populated the landscapes of so many desert romance novels and films throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Moreover, Arab American cultural engagements on this front increased in the 1920s, when, following the release of Valentino’s

³ For a broad historical account of these forms of entertainment, see: John Springhall, *The Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840-1940* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

⁴ Dorman, “Marry Girls of Your Own Religion,” 10A.

film, casual fascination with desert sheiks turned into the faddish obsession known as “sheikmania.”

While Arab Americans, and more broadly Arabs in general, might not always be afforded the privilege of complete mastery over their own image in the U.S., they have proved remarkably adept at negotiating prevailing generalizations. One strategy, and perhaps the most obvious, was to simply reject and resist Orientalism – the diverse modes of discourse that sought to define Arabs as foreign, exotic, and Other to normative American identities.⁵ Opposition was most prevalent in Ameen Rihani’s 1929 critique of Hollywood’s consistent output of sheik-themed desert romance films in the 1920s.⁶ While I do explore Rihani’s critical engagement with American popular culture at the end of this chapter, the fact remains that many Arab Americans, for varying reasons, had a more nuanced and constructive relationship with the cultural productions that Rihani so vehemently opposed.

To understand these negotiated readings, I utilize the concept of “self-Orientalism.”⁷ As scholars like Matthew Jaber Stiffler, Lori Anne Salem, Brian T. Edwards, Susan Nance, and Lhoussain Simour have demonstrated, it was not uncommon for Arab Americans and, more broadly, Arabs to selectively engage with commonly-held ideas and images that marked them as

⁵ The study of Orientalism as a discursive concept of Western European and American relations with the Arab and Islamic world was pioneered by literary scholar Edward W. Said in his classic *Orientalism* (1978). Since then, a number of scholars have utilized, critiqued, and nuanced our understanding of Orientalism. For a complete account of how I situate this dissertation within the theoretical and historical debates concerning Orientalism, see my introduction.

⁶ For other accounts of Arab opposition to American cultural productions, see: Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interest in the Middle East since 1945* (2001), updated edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 257-259 and 263-264 and Karin G. Wilkins and John Downing, “Mediating Terrorism: Text and Protest in the Interpretation of *The Siege*,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 4: 419-437.

⁷ I borrow the term “negotiated reading” from Stuart Hall, who posits three modes of media interpretation: dominant/hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. See: Stuart Hall, “Encoding, Decoding,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 90-103 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 102.

exotic, foreign, or other.⁸ While self-Orientalism always runs the risk of further perpetuating dangerous stereotypes, it also has afforded Arab Americans several psychological, social, and material benefits. For instance, the practice offered Arab Americans a modicum of control, however limited, over their own image. In promoting Orientalism, Arab Americans could selectively promote the generalizations or misconceptions they deemed appropriate or safe and reject or ignore others that may be dangerous. Moreover, the adoption of commonly-held stereotypes might be utilized as a bargaining chip in promoting assimilation into a more privileged position within the racial hierarchy governing American life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This was most definitely true for many Christian Syrian immigrants who tirelessly labored to integrate themselves within a legal definition of whiteness – a move which granted them access to national citizenship. Self-Orientalism could, therefore, be utilized as a tool to mark “foreign” Arabs as Other but Arab (or at least Christian Syrian) immigrants as fully American.⁹ Finally, this practice was not without its material benefits. Throughout the period, the

⁸ While not all scholars explicitly label these practices as “self-Orientalism,” a number have explored contemporary and historical occurrences of Arab and Arab American negotiations of their own image. See, for example: Matthew Jaber Stiffler, “Authentic Arabs, Authentic Christians: Antiochian Orthodox and the Mobilization of Cultural Identity,” PhD. Diss. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010) and “Consuming Orientalism: Public Foodways of Arab American Christians,” *Mashriq and Mahjar* 2, no. 2 (2014): 111-138; Lori Anne Salem, “Far-Off and Fascinating Things: Wadeha Atiyeh and Images of Arabs in the American Popular Theater, 1930-1950,” in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, edited by Michael W. Suleiman, 272-283 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) and “Race, Sexuality, and Arabs in American Entertainment, 1850-1900,” in *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music, and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*, edited by Sherifa Zuhur, 211-227 (New York: American University of Cairo Press, 2001); Susan Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream, 1790-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Lhoussain Simour, *Recollecting History beyond Borders: Captives, Acrobats, Dancers, and the Moroccan-American Narrative of Encounters* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); Brian T. Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America’s Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁹ For more on the relationship between race, immigration, and citizenship, particularly as it relates to Arab Americans in this period, see: Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Michael W. Suleiman, “The Arab Immigrant Experience,” introduction to *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, edited by Michael W. Suleiman, 1-21 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); and Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber, eds., *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

supposed exotic and sexual allure of the Orient was utilized by American corporations and advertisers as a marketing strategy to further promote the purchase of commodities in a growing consumer capitalist society. “Commodity Orientalism,” as Melani McAlister labels it, was deployed to promote the consumption of a broad range of goods throughout the U.S. and abroad, including but not limited to: cigarettes, furniture and home furnishings, clothing, and food stuffs.¹⁰ For many Arab Americans, then, Orientalism as well as the popular figure of the sheik offered a ready path to advertise their own goods and services as well as further integrate their lives and careers into the growing consumer culture of the modern U.S. There was, in other words, a lucrative market in the U.S. for goods, ideas, and services deemed “Oriental,” which many Arab Americans proved fully capable of exploiting to their own potential benefit.

Whether they chose to embrace or resist the allure of the exotic East, Arab Americans like Sheik Hadji Tahar, Ameen Rihani, and the others explored throughout this chapter occupy an important position in the historical narrative of the American obsession with Arab sheiks and desert romance. Their lives and careers, as documented in the popular press, the entertainment industry trade press, as well as the English-language Arab American press, nuance our contemporary understandings of American Orientalism and exemplify the complex and diverse ways in which an historically stereotyped social group negotiated the limitations and opportunities embedded in commonly-held assumptions about their identities. This chapter is focused on documenting the lives, careers, and intentions behind Arab American engagements with the figure of the sheik. As such, my primary concern is empirical documentation as well as

¹⁰ For more on the relationship between Orientalism and advertising, see: McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 20-29; Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*; Holly Edwards, “A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930,” in *Noble Dreams - Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930*, edited by Holly Edwards, 11-57 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 40-53; and Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

critical analysis of the varied ways and reasons that Arab Americans consumed, resisted, and re-worked dominant cultural icons. Readers looking for a broader account of American Orientalism, specifically as it relates to the figure of the sheik in mass entertainment, should consult chapters one and two of this dissertation.

A “Purveyor of Superior Attractions”: Sheik Hadji Tahar’s Career in American Entertainment, 1876-1938¹¹

In 1876, Sheik Hadji Tahar ben Mohammed claimed to have met an American man named Van Amberg while traveling through Constantinople (Istanbul) with his crew of Arab entertainers. Van Amberg, who owned a circus in the U.S., took a keen interest in convincing the sheik and his entourage to visit his country. Tahar recalled Van Amberg telling him that “people would be eager to see the Arab acrobats.” Tahar, who was equally as “eager to make money,” selected a crew of acrobats, horsemen, and dancers, trained them and headed across the Atlantic Ocean.¹²

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, entertainers from across North Africa and West Asia traveled to Europe and the U.S. to exhibit their talents and make a living. These troupes were composed of both men and women, Arabs and Berbers, acrobats, dancers, and horsemen, as well as managers like Tahar. Van Amberg was not lying to Tahar when he told the sheik that “people would be eager to see the Arab acrobats.” In 1876, Tahar was walking into a market ripe with economic opportunity for someone like himself who could package and exhibit

¹¹ Other scholars like Nance and Simour have discussed Sheik Hadji Tahar to varying degrees. Such accounts, however, are limited in that they often discuss him alongside a variety of other Arab entertainers. In this chapter, I present a more holistic documentation of Tahar’s life and career. In other words, whereas previous scholarship has provided a broader analysis of the field of Arab American entertainment, my approach has been to provide a specific and detailed semi-biographical account of one man’s career.

¹² Dorman, “Marry Girls of Your Own Religion,” 10A.

entertainments with an Eastern flair to American audiences captivated with a commodified Orient. Americans would have encountered these foreign entertainers at a variety of mass entertainment venues throughout the period. Such venues included: wild west, minstrel, and variety shows; traveling circuses; Worlds Fairs and international exhibitions; as well as theatrical and cinematic venues. A live or recorded show featuring imported entertainment from North Africa and West Asia could include a retinue of displays, such as: belly dancers, Sufi whirling dervishes, Bedouin horsemen, rifle twirling, or sword dueling, as well as individual and group acrobatics. Oftentimes, like Tahar, the leaders of these troupes referred to themselves as “sheiks,” a term which was picked up and promoted in the local and national coverage of these events.¹³

It was upon this established tradition of American consumption of foreign entertainment that Sheik Hadji Tahar crafted his lucrative career in the U.S., throughout which he received extensive press coverage in both the popular and entertainment trade presses. Tahar was born sometime between 1842-1846 possibly in the month of August in either Arabia or Yemen.¹⁴ Before coming to the U.S., he was reported to have studied at Cambridge University. It was perhaps in England that Tahar, like many of his Arab and Berber predecessors, began to make

¹³ For more on Arab and Arab American contributions to nineteenth and twentieth century mass entertainment in the U.S., see: Salem, “Race, Sexuality, and Arabs in American Entertainment, 1850-1900”; Nance, “Arab Athleticism and the Exoticization of the American Dream, 1870-1920,” ch. 4 in *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*; and Simour, “Moroccan Acrobats in Nineteenth Century America: Acrobatic Spectacles between Cultural Curiosity, Ethnic Exhibition, and Interracial Fascination,” ch. 3 in *Recollecting History beyond Borders*.

¹⁴ The precise year and location of Tahar’s birth is difficult to pin down with certainty. The 1920 U.S. Federal Census, for example, list his place of birth as “Arabia,” a term which may have corresponded to the geographic Arabian peninsula or could have been used as a catchall term by the Census Bureau. Moreover, the census lists his age at last birthday as 74 years, meaning Tahar’s birth year would have fallen into the range of 1845-1846, depending on which month he was born and the month in which the census data was collected and published. On the other hand, in her 1928 prison interview of Tahar, Dorman writes that Tahar was from Yemen and his current age was 86, meaning his year of birth might have been as early as 1842. See: Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920 - Population* (Manhattan, NY: 1920): 17B, Heritage Quest, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com/HQA> (accessed March 13, 2017); Dorman, “Marry Girls of Your Own Religion,” 10A.

inroads into acrobatics and entertainment.¹⁵ The precise date and reason for Tahar's immigration to the U.S. is the subject of some debate.¹⁶ In all likelihood, however, he made the trip in 1876 to attend the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia. Not only was 1876 the year Tahar claimed to have immigrated in his 1928 prison interview, but the year is also corroborated by the U.S. Census of 1920.¹⁷ It was in this year, as noted earlier, that Tahar claimed to have met the American circus manager Van Amberg in Constantinople. Informed of the immense opportunities for a showman like himself and "eager to make money," as he claimed, Tahar made the decision to travel across the Atlantic.¹⁸

And so Tahar came to the U.S. "with 75 acrobats, dancers, and horsemen" to entertain audiences at the Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia.¹⁹ What happened directly after the exhibition, like so much of Tahar's life, is a mystery, but between 1882-1883, he and the troupe went on a European tour, traveling from Constantinople to Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain, France, and England. While back in England, he met W. W. Cole, an American showman who brought them back to the U.S. From there, Tahar and his troupe found success throughout the end of the century and into the next, contracting for carnivals, vaudeville theaters, minstrel shows, circuses, and wild west shows throughout the U.S. and abroad. In 1890, for instance, he

¹⁵ Simour, *Recollecting History beyond Borders*, 101-105.

¹⁶ In a 1947 *Billboard* retrospective on Arab acrobats, Billy Pape claims that none other than Buffalo Bill himself brought the troupe of Hadji Tahar (misspelled twice as "Maji Tahar" in the article) to the U.S. in 1865. Elsewhere, in an 1899 obituary, Albert E. Schaible, the recently-deceased business manager for Buffalo Bill, was credited as the man who first imported Tahar. The obituary, however, does not specify the year in which Schaible reportedly recruited Tahar. More recently, scholar Lhoussain Simour cites, perhaps unintentionally, both 1865 and 1876 as Tahar's year of immigration. See: Billy Pape, "Omar, Where Art Thou? - What's Become of the Arabian Tumblers," *Billboard* (November 29, 1947): 72; "Tribute to a Dead Comrade: Members of Wild West Show Place Flowers on Mr. Schaible's Grave," *Sun* (Baltimore) (April 18, 1899): 7; and Simour, *Recollecting History beyond Boundaries*, 97 and 125.

¹⁷ Dorman, "Marry Girls of Your Own Religion," 10A and Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States*, 17B.

¹⁸ Dorman, "Marry Girls of Your Own Religion," 10A.

¹⁹ Dorman, "Marry Girls of Your Own Religion," 10A.

traveled to Australia with the Sells Bros. Circus and after went to Mexico with the Orrin Bros. He was also reported to have contracted with the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Tahar was most likely present at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago. He even claimed to have been in charge of the popular Streets of Cairo attraction at the 1893 fair. The following year, saw Tahar go on tour with the Buffalo Bill Wild West show.²⁰

After Touring with Buffalo Bill in 1894, Tahar got his first taste of emerging motion picture technologies. On October 6, 1894, he entered Thomas A. Edison's Black Maria Studio in West Orange, New Jersey. The studio was where Edison and employees of the Edison Manufacturing Company experimented with some of the earliest forms of motion picture photography. The film studio, believed to be the first in the U.S., was narrow and cramped, only allowing for a single Kinetograph, the technological predecessor to the motion picture camera, to film its subject head-on in front of a simple backdrop often made of black tar paper. Tahar was visiting with an eclectic group of entertainers from the Buffalo Bill show. Along with Tahar was Hadj Cheriff, a whirling dervish and associate of Tahar's, as well as Vincente Oropeza, Pedro Esquivel and Dionecio Gonzales, three Mexican entertainers who specialized in lassoing and knife dueling. All five men demonstrated their abilities before the Kinetograph that was operated by William Heise. Cheriff offered a variety performance featuring knife juggling and acrobatics. Esquivel and Gonzales engaged in a staged knife fight and Oropeza demonstrated his skills with a lasso. While Cheriff, Esquivel, and Gonzales' films still exist in their entirety and Oropeza's in

²⁰ Simour, *Recollecting History beyond Borders*, 97; Nance, *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream*, 119-120; Dorman, "Marry Girls of Your Own Religion," 10A; "Sheik Hadji Tahar," *Billboard* 16, no.32 (August 6, 1904): 2; "Wonderful Feats of Arabs Form an Interesting Feature of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show," *Washington Post* (May 3, 1898): 10; Chas C. Foltz, "Howard F. Jones Gives His Views on 'First Carnival,'" *Billboard* (June 13, 1925): 110; "Views of a Fair Moor: Zahar Ben Tahar Tells Her Impressions of Americans," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (June 16, 1894): 10; "Sheik, 103, to Build Orient City at Fair," *New York Times* (August 11, 1932): 17 and "Fair 'City' to Be Built by 103-Year-Old Sheik," *Los Angeles Times* (August 11, 1932): 5.

fragments, Tahar's fifty feet of film stock, which was given the title *Sheik Hadji Tahar*, is unfortunately considered lost.²¹

Despite this limitation, one that is all too commonly encountered by historians of early cinema, more than likely the attraction featured Tahar juggling and twirling a rifle. The film's alternative title, *Arab Gun Juggler*, supports this conclusion, along with a photo taken in the Black Maria studio on that day. The portrait features Tahar and his Wild West Show traveling companions. Tahar and Oropeza are both seated with Cheriff, Esquivel, and Gonzales standing behind them. Tahar is clothed in the long flowing robes of a Bedouin sheik and tucked into the crook of his arm is a long and ornately decorated flintlock rifle, presumably the one he had juggled before the Kinetograph. What exactly Tahar's gun juggling looked like, we will never know. However, a later surviving print from the Edison Manufacturing Company titled *Arabian Gun Twirler* (1899) can at least offer us a possible ideal. *Arabian Gun Twirler* features Hadj Cheriff. In the brief span of about twenty seconds, we see Cheriff impressively twirling a rifle into the air, over his shoulders and back, and around each of his hands.²²

After the October 6 visit to Edison Studios, Tahar parted ways with his companions from the Buffalo Bill show and headed to Philadelphia where his troupe was to perform with the Primrose and West minstrel show.²³ Between 1895-1896 Tahar and his troupe of acrobats, along with several other of his Arab entertainment contemporaries like George Jabour, Hadj Cheriff, Mdm. Nazzarra, and Hassan Ben Ali, went on tour with traveling carnival of Otto Schmidt and Joe Baylies, manager and owner (respectively) of the People's Theater of Chicago. According to

²¹ Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900: An Annotated Filmography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 135-138.

²² Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures*, 135-138. A preserved and digitized copy of *Arab Gun Twirler* can be found at the website of the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/96515758/> (accessed April 17, 2017).

²³ Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900*, 136-137.

veteran showman Howard F. Jones, the traveling carnival was the first of its kind. The idea came to Schmidt after the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, when he thought it would be a good idea to gather and tour with some of the most popular attractions that were featured on the Midway Plaisance. In 1895, Tahar, along with over 500 entertainers, managers, and staff climbed aboard a train of "seven loaded flat cars and six box cars" and headed from Chicago to Syracuse, where they were to entertain at the New York State Fair.²⁴

The show itself featured an eclectic range of attractions and was so complex that the carpenters had to be sent out in advance to the next destination where it might take an entire week to prepare the upcoming show. Among the features were multiple ethnic villages and entertainments found on the Midway in 1893. These included the popular Streets of Cairo complete with camel rides, an Irish village, as well as Persian Theater. Attendees might also go to see the one-ring circus, a trained wild animal arena, three different illusion shows, several art galleries, a congress of wonders (probably a freak show), an operetta, beauty show, as well as three different live bands. Outside the midway proper, Cheriff and Nazzarra performed atop two fifty-foot towers, juggling rifles and whirling in the fashion of Sufi dervishes. Hassan Ben Ali and Tahar engaged each other in a staged broadsword duel while ten of Tahar's troupe engaged in acrobatics and tumbling.²⁵

Throughout the end of the century and into the next, Tahar continued to travel with his group of Arab entertainers, appearing across the nation in cities like Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Los Angeles.²⁶ In August 1900, they showed up at the Al G. Field Greater Minstrel show in

²⁴ Foltz, "Howard F. Jones Gives His Views on 'First Carnival,'" 110.

²⁵ Foltz, "Howard F. Jones Gives His Views on 'First Carnival,'" 110.

²⁶ "Sheik Hadji Tahar," 2; "Al G. Field's Minstrels," *Cincinnati Enquirer* (August 12, 1900): 26; "Sheik Hadji Tahar's Arabian Acrobats," Advertisements, Amusements, and Entertainments, *Los Angeles Times* (November 9, 1902); "Chutes Theater, Park, and Zoo," The Playhouses, *Los Angeles Times* (November 18, 1902): 6.

Marion, Ohio. The show was presented in a variety-type format featuring musicians and comedians as well as athletes and acrobats. It was broken down into three thematic acts, the third of which was titled “The Fete at Mecca,” described by the *Cincinnati Enquirer* as an “Oriental spectacle.” The act featured a “tribe of Moorish Mamelukes ... direct from the Orient.” According to the *Enquirer*, “Their gun-spinning, sword combats, lofty tumbling, vaulting and pyramid building border on the marvelous.” In addition to praising the performance of the Mameluke troupe, the *Enquirer* gave special recognition to Tahar’s work on the costumes, music, and scenery, which were described as “correct to the most minute detail.”²⁷

At the turn of the century, Tahar continued his work importing and managing Arab acrobatic and athletic acts. He even began importing entertainers from Russia and Greece – perhaps individuals he met on his previous European tour. Between 1904-1906, as he traveled across the U.S. to cities like St. Louis and Oakland, California, Tahar took out advertisements in entertainment publications like *Billboard* and the *New York Clipper*. These advertisements marketed Tahar as a purveyor of exotic attractions. A popular advertisement, for instance, read: “Managers wishing superior attractions, Arabian Acrobatic Troupes, and others, as Free Shows at Carnivals, Fairs, etc. or Free Streets of Cairo, can procure same by addressing Sheik Hadji Tahar.”²⁸ In the early twentieth century, then, Tahar’s professional reputation was still very much built around being an “importer and manager of several Arabian acrobatic troupes,” as a short *Billboard* exposé described him.²⁹

By the late nineteen-teens, Tahar’s career began to shift as he settled in New York City, taking up his professional residence in Suite 801-02 of the Columbia Theater Building. By 1919

²⁷ “Al G. Field’s Minstrels,” 26.

²⁸ “The Sheik Hadji Tahar: Attractions,” Professional Cards, *Billboard* 16, no. 32 (August 6, 1904): 18 and “Managers, Attention!” Advertisement, *New York Clipper* (November 24, 1906): 1071.

²⁹ “Sheik Hadji Tahar,” 2.

he was writing, producing, and exhibiting Oriental-themed theatrical acts like “The Sultan’s Dream” and “The Ancient Rug with the Spirit of the Buddha.”³⁰ He also arranged the music for a 1920 Broadway production of “The Virgin of Stamboul” as well as a 1922 production of Oscar Wilde’s infamous Orientalist production, “Salome.”³¹ It was also in New York that Tahar, along with I. Epstein and S. Dushey, established his own motion picture corporation named “Ko-Ko Komedies.” The company, which had its own studio located at Coney Island, produced short comedies featuring Arab comedian Selim Koko.³² One advertisement for the new company featured a comedic poem that gives a sense that Tahar, as was so common throughout his career, aimed to use the language and visual imagery of Orientalism to sell his and Selim’s comedy to a predominantly white “Yankee” audience:

A noble Sheik by the name Tahar,
Who came from old Arabia far;
The high cost of living – “Oh, Soko!”
Drove out a comedian, named Selim Koko.
While he did not kill the fatted calf,
He could make the pyramid laugh;
The Sphinx did dance – the crocodile sigh,
Now the Yankees will laugh till they cry.³³

In addition to establishing his own small production company out east, there is evidence to suggest that Tahar was beginning to get involved with film production in Hollywood.

In her 1928 prison interview with Tahar, Marjorie Dorman contends that the sheik “and his Arabs ... appeared in all the early desert pictures. Usually the Prince was cast for a role of an

³⁰ The latter play was co-authored with Adolph Adams. See: “Rehearsing Oriental Act,” Vaudeville, *New York Clipper* (May 7, 1919): 8 and “New Acts,” Vaudeville, *New York Clipper* (September 3, 1919): 7.

³¹ “Ko-Ko Komedies: New Picture Corporation Formed by H. Tahar to Produce Two-Reelers and Special Features of the Orient,” *Billboard* (March 27, 1920): 93 and “‘Salome’ Booked for Klaw,” *Billboard* 34, no. 20 (May 20, 1922): 21.

³² There are a variety of different spellings of his name, including many in which “Koko” (or Ko-Ko) appears before Selim (sometimes spelled Salem or Salum). To remain consistent with the passage quoted below, I have retained “Selim Koko.”

³³ Advertisement for Ko-Ko-Komedies, Inc., *Billboard* (April 3, 1920): 82. See also: “Ko-Ko Komedies,” 80 and 93 and “To Make Oriental Comedies,” *New York Clipper* (January 28, 1920): 5.

Arab chieftain, appearing on his horse at a gallop across the sands.” In the same interview, Tahar presented himself less as an actor and more as a contractor and manager: “I was technically directing my men who did all the riding in these and many other pictures set in the deserts of Arabia and elsewhere.” To what degree Tahar was actually involved in the production of Hollywood films is hard to determine. Dorman, for instance, claimed that the sheik typically contracted with Universal. Yet, none of the specific films Tahar claimed to have worked on in the interview, which included *Barbary Sheep* (1917), *The Sheik* (1921), and *The Garden of Allah* (1927), were produced by Universal.³⁴

Regardless, Tahar was more than likely somehow involved in the production of Hollywood films. He certainly advertised himself as such. A 1920 advertisement for the *New York Clipper*, claimed that Tahar Enterprises was the:

Premier in all in and outdoor attractions. Unusual Actors of all Foreign types. Extra people for Theatres and *Motion Pictures* [emphasis added]. Instructor of Ancient Dancing and Acrobatic work. Technical Directors of Oriental productions. Far Eastern costumes and paraphernalia. Musicians, Jugglers, Fakers, Sword and Gunmen; Horses, Camels and Trained Animals of all kinds.³⁵

Moreover, several articles from the Hollywood-based trade journal, *Variety*, corroborate the conclusion that Tahar did indeed get business from the major film studios. One article from 1924, for instance, described him as “the dusky son of the Sahara, who supplies the theatrical and moving pictures producers of the United States with talent from Arabia and India.”³⁶

Elsewhere, *Variety* claimed that Tahar “furnish[ed] whole tribes of Arabs and Hindoos to the large moving picture concerns.”³⁷

³⁴ Dorman, “Marry Girls of Your Own Religion,” 10A.

³⁵ “Sheik Hadji Tahar Enterprises,” Advertisement, *New York Clipper* (January 28, 1920): 34.

³⁶ “Sheik Tahar Again Accused: Girl from Bavaria Wants Her \$50 Back - In Police Court for It,” *Variety* (September 10, 1924): 5.

³⁷ Outdoor Items, *Variety* (July 4, 1923): 8.

In addition to being involved in production, Tahar also found work in the field of film exhibition. In 1922, J. F. Clancy, manager of the Capitol Theatre in Hartford, Connecticut, contracted Tahar to construct and manage an elaborate and interactive lobby display for his theater's release of Vitagraph's *The Sheik's Wife* (1922). *The Sheik's Wife* was one of the first of many films to ride on the success of Paramount's *The Sheik*, released the previous year. To better promote the film and draw in customers to his theater, Clancy came up with the idea to turn his lobby into an Arabian bazaar. Moreover, he wanted to offer an entertaining and appropriate staged prologue to the film that would fit with *The Sheik's Wife* Orientalist aesthetics. Who better to involve than Tahar, who brought with himself to Hartford "fifteen real Arabians including whirling dervishes, sword fighters, snake charmers and other Oriental entertainers."³⁸ Clancy also drew upon the efforts of others in the community, including: local shopkeepers, the Masons, and a local female singer.

To prepare the lobby and create a more subdued atmosphere, Clancy decorated the ceilings with red and green stars, crescents, and streamers. The floors were covered, to be expected, with Oriental rugs. On each side of the lobby were three booths "decorated in the Oriental manner."³⁹ By this, the author was probably referring to the booths' domed ceilings. The female members of Tahar's troupe worked these booths, selling goods like "Turkish candy, laces, small jewelry, prayer beads, and other Oriental things."⁴⁰ In one corner of the lobby was an

³⁸ "Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar: Hartford Exploitation of 'The Sheik's Wife' Sets New Record for the City," *Motion Picture News* (May 13, 1922): 2676 and "'Sheik's Wife' Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises," *Exhibitors Herald* (May 20, 1922): 54.

³⁹ "Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar," 2676 and "'Sheik's Wife' Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises," 54.

⁴⁰ "Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar," 2676 and "'Sheik's Wife' Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises," 54.

over-sized booth, flanked by two giant crescent moons. The inside was “decorated with rare rugs and silks borrowed from a local store. In this reclined a veiled wax figure” of the sheik’s wife.⁴¹

Prior to the opening of *The Sheik’s Wife*, Tahar’s troupe put on a free show for those waiting in the lobby in which the Arabs “alternated in doing stunts and hawking the wares they had for sale.”⁴² A group of musicians with stringed instruments and a small hand drum played “weird Arabian music” bringing in additional patrons off the streets and into the theater.⁴³ According to *Exhibitors Herald*, “[T]he lobby, which easily accommodates more than a thousand, was crowded before the doors of the theatre proper were opened for the first performance.”⁴⁴ A live prologue to the screening also featured Tahar’s troupe in its entirety:

In the prologue all of the Arabs took part, each of their specialties being introduced by a cleverly written, connected story and closing with the appearance of Miss Olive Russel, a local singer of note, who veiled and costumed like the Sheik’s Wife sang the Hindoo Chant by Bemberg.⁴⁵

Not only did Tahar provide entertainment within the theater, but his troupes’ movements from the theater to the hotel also made an impression on the local community:

During the week the Arabs went from the theatre to their hotel in their picturesque costumes and on clear days Sheik Hadji, attended by two Arabs in their native military costumes, rode Arabian horses, with their gaudy trappings, between hotel and theatre.⁴⁶

By 1923, if not sooner, Tahar along with his most recent wife Julia were living at 62 Lynbrook Avenue on Long Island.⁴⁷ As noted in the introduction, Tahar attributed Julia’s

⁴¹ “Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar,” 2676 and “‘Sheik’s Wife’ Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises,” 54.

⁴² “Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar,” 2676.

⁴³ “Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar,” 2676 and “‘Sheik’s Wife’ Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises,” 54.

⁴⁴ “‘Sheik’s Wife’ Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises,” 54.

⁴⁵ “‘Sheik’s Wife’ Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises,” 54.

⁴⁶ “Clancy Turns Lobby into Arabian Bazaar,” 2676 and “‘Sheik’s Wife’ Answers Demand of the Theatre that Advertises,” 54.

⁴⁷ Lynbrook, NY City Directory (1923): 188, Heritage Quest, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com/HQA> (accessed May 15, 2017).

divorce proceedings, which she had initiated in 1927, and her demand for alimony as the reason for his business's downfall. About the \$775 of alimony Julia demanded, Tahar had the following to say:

I have not this sum ... All that I had she had taken. Once it is true, I was a man of means and many checks came in. But of late years, since my third wife took everything, I am dependent upon friends, and there are no more checks coming in."⁴⁸

In the same interview, Tahar made a similar point: "Now, after taking all I have, she has thrown me into jail to get from me money I do not possess." Tahar's bitter tone is certainly understandable. He had been in a holding cell of the 37th St. Manhattan County Jail for nearly a month over the alimony charges and was not set to be released for five more months.⁴⁹ Whether his business downfall can solely be attributed to Julia, however, is historically suspect. While it was certainly the way Tahar perceived the situation, it is worth mentioning that throughout the 1920s, Tahar became involved in a series of legal disputes most of which could have been detrimental to both the finances and reputation of his enterprise.

In April 1924, for instance, Stephen Squicciarini contracted with Tahar to find work as a musician. When Tahar failed to procure a job and refused to refund the musician's down payment, Squicciarini filed a complaint with the New York Department of Licenses.⁵⁰ Likewise, when aspiring movie actress Margaret Herdegen arrived in New York from Bavaria, she contracted with Tahar in hopes of finding work. After much negotiating she agreed to pay Tahar \$50. When a friend found out about the deal, she told Margaret "she might just as well kiss that fifty good-bye."⁵¹ While Tahar, ultimately won the suit, he was beginning to build up a

⁴⁸ Dorman, "Marry Girls of Your Own Religion," 10A.

⁴⁹ "Sheik, 86, First Arab to Join Alimony Club; Fears Jail Stigma May Be Fatal to Father, 117," *New York Times* (September 1, 1928): 15.

⁵⁰ "Sheik' in Court: Musician Complains to License Bureau Against Arabian Agent," *Variety* (April 23, 1924): 6.

⁵¹ "Sheik Tahar Again Accused," 5.

reputation as a swindler.⁵² For instance, District Attorney Charles White adjourned Herdegen's case, but not before claiming that "other girls have been done out of money by Tahar."⁵³

Similar accusations arose a year later, when Tahar was accused of withholding pay to four dancers, Elizabeth Vanek, the De Rosa Sisters, and May Jackson, who appeared in a show titled "In the Streets of Bagdad." According to the dancers, "Instead of being paid at the end of each week ... Tahar advanced them small sums with the promise that as soon as the attraction made more money they would be paid in full." According to *Billboard*, "This is not the first time that Tahar has come within the toils of the law"⁵⁴ This series of legal disputes scattered across the 1920s all of which predate Julia Tahar's alimony plea, casts some doubt on whether or not Tahar's estranged wife was solely to blame for the sheik's economic woes.

Despite these troubles Tahar continued to find work throughout the decade and into the next. He was, for example, present at a 1932 Christmas festival and circus of the Motor Vehicle Club of New Jersey. Held at the Hildebrecht Hotel in Trenton, Tahar introduced a troupe of Indian dancers.⁵⁵ Also, in 1932, Tahar received a commission to build the Oriental City for the 1933-1934 Chicago World's Fair. The exhibit, which was projected to cost roughly \$1 million, was to be partially funded by Tahar's first cousin, none other than Ibn Saud, monarch of the recently established Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. According to Tahar, the city was to be "populate[d] with 2,000 people, combining all the Oriental races except the Japanese and Chinese." The city was to serve as "a monument to the fast disappearing picturesqueness of the

⁵² "Sheik Tahar Discharged," *Variety* (September 17, 1924): 4.

⁵³ "Sheik Tahar Again Accused," 5.

⁵⁴ "Sheik Tahar is in Again," *Billboard* (August 8, 1925): 9.

⁵⁵ Leonard Traube, Out in the Open, *Billboard* (December 31, 1932): 85.

Orient.” It was also Tahar’s hope that he could reconstruct a similar village in New York City (Jamaica or Queens districts) as a permanent residence “where only Orientals would reside.”⁵⁶

Despite the extensive coverage Tahar received over the course of his career, little was made of his death in the press. As with most of the details of his personal life, it is nearly impossible to pinpoint the exact date on which he died, but in all likelihood Sheik Hadji Tahar ben Mohammed passed away in his adopted home of New York City sometime in 1938.⁵⁷ His divorce to Julia was never legally ratified. According to the 1940 U.S. Federal Census, Julia, who continued to reside at 62 Lynbrook Ave, retained the last name Tahar and she classified her marital status as “widower.”⁵⁸

Sheik Tahar’s fascinating life and career represents but one historical example of Arab American engagement with the dominant Orientalist culture in the U.S. In coming to the U.S., Tahar worked his way into previously existing circuits of entertainment. Rather than resist the predominant American understandings of “Arabness” as exotic or foreign, he worked with them, promoting himself as the sheik of an exotic band of Arab acrobats and entertainers. Indulging in this type of self-Orientalism seemed to pay off for Tahar as he worked his way into a variety of live and recorded entertainment venues throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Tahar, however, was not the only Arab American to playfully engage in this type of exoticism. In 1930, following the theatrical success of Rudolph Valentino’s *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926), allusions to the film and its romantic plot rather interestingly appeared in the foreign affairs coverage of *Syrian World*. As the main English-language

⁵⁶ “Sheik, 103, to Build Orient City at Fair,” 17; “Fair ‘City’ to Be Built by 103-Year-Old Sheik,” 5; and “Here is a Genuine Sheik,” *Detroit Free Press* (August 15, 1932): 2

⁵⁷ “Death Shows ‘Sheik’ Faker for 30 Years,” *Toronto Daily Star* (January 20, 1939): 30.

⁵⁸ Department of Commerce - Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 - Population Schedule* (Hempstead Township, Nassau County, New York): 4A, Heritage Quest, <https://www.ancestryheritagequest.com/HQA> (accessed May 22, 2017).

periodical of New York City's large Syrian Arab community, self-Orientalism helped bolster a distinction between the more cosmopolitan Syrian American readers and publishers of the magazine and the tribal Syrian Bedouin who were the subject of the journal's political coverage. This strategy, as explored below, implicitly marked the former as assimilated U.S. citizens and the latter as barbaric, unassimilated foreigners.⁵⁹

“Arab Sheik Enacts Real Love Drama”: Desert Romance in *Syrian World's* Political Coverage

When violence broke out between two Syrian tribes in October 1930, *Syrian World* reported on the event. The incident involved Emir Norwaq (also spelled Nawaf) El-Ahmed, who *Syrian World* variously described as a “ranking sheik,” a “young sheik,” and “sheik-lover.”⁶⁰ El-Ahmed, a ranking chief of the Mawali tribe, it would seem was enamored with Sabha, a beautiful maiden of the Hudaidi tribe located in the village of Nahtara in Northern Syria. When El-Ahmed sought Sabha's hand in marriage, he was either outright denied by her father or feared that denial was imminent, the accounts vary. Taking matters into his own hands, El-Ahmed, his brother, and one other tribesmen sneaked into the village under the cover of darkness and kidnapped Sabha. When the villagers of Nahtara learned of the abduction, they followed in pursuit of El-Ahmed. A skirmish ensued outside the village, resulting in the death of two Nahtara villagers and the injury of Sabha's father at the hands of El-Ahmed. Despite the rescue attempt, El-Ahmed escaped into the desert with his kidnapped prize, leaving behind in his wake an unresolved tribal conflict

⁵⁹ For more on the role of *Syrian World* in the development of early Arab American identity, see: Hani Ismael Elayyan, “The *Syrian World* in the New World: The Contextual Beginnings of Arab American Literature and the Part it Played in Identity Formation,” in *Arabs in the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora*, edited by Darcy A. Zabel, 45-58 (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

⁶⁰ “Arab Sheik Enacts Real Love Drama,” *Syrian World* (November 1930): 56 and “Love and War in the Desert: An Actual Love Drama Among the Bedouins and its Sequel,” *Syrian World* (December 1930): 28.

which the French Military was monitoring closely. By December, El-Ahmed and his captive were still at large, possibly escaping to Iraq across the Euphrates River.⁶¹

In its coverage of the events unfolding in the fall of 1930, the *Syrian World* filtered this story through a cultural lens that was obviously impacted by sheikmania and, more broadly, Orientalism. One article from the November issue of the magazine, for example, suggested that the “real love drama” would have been a suitable plot to a desert romance film:

What a pity that the camera man was absent!

For there was enacted in northern Syria the latter part of October a real love tragedy of which the hero was a genuine Arab sheikh and the villain the father of his beautiful beloved.⁶²

Interestingly in this passage, it is sheik El-Ahmaed who was romanticized as the hero of the drama, despite having obviously transgressed tribal laws concerning marriage. Having been denied Sabha’s hand in marriage by her father, El-Ahmed hatched a plan, which *Syrian World* preceded to describe in a self-reflexive manner that was explicitly aware of its engagements with the genre conventions of desert romance :

But the young sheik could not as easily dismiss from his heart the love of the beautiful urban maiden. So, carried on the wings of desire ... [he] forced the house of the girl in the most approved romantic style and proceeded to carry her away from her bed.⁶³

The author’s use of the phrase “most approved romantic style” was telling of the article’s conscious engagement with broader literary and cinematic tropes. As if to make this connection overly apparent, the article concludes: “What romancer could invent a more daring and blood curdling plot!”⁶⁴

⁶¹ “Arab Sheik Enacts Real Love Drama,” 56 and “Love and War in the Desert,” 27-34.

⁶² “Arab Sheik Enacts Real Love Drama,” 56.

⁶³ “Arab Sheik Enacts Real Love Drama,” 56.

⁶⁴ “Arab Sheik Enacts Real Love Drama,” 56.

Syrian World printed a more in-depth article of the event in its December issue, again describing it as a real-life desert romance. The article, for instance, spoke of both El-Ahmed's "consuming" and "uncontrollable" love. Likewise, the sheik's escape was also romantically described: "None of the pursuers now dared brave the fire of the kidnappers, who carried the girl and rode swiftly away on their fleet of Arabian horses and were swallowed by the night." In its coverage, *Syrian World* also recycled many stock phrases from its previous article, labeling El-Ahmed as the "sheik-lover" and describing his actions as being committed "in the most approved romantic style."⁶⁵

The December coverage, however, went beyond mere engagement with sheikmania, deploying more generally a broad range of Orientalist tropes that fueled such dramas. *Syrian World* marked Bedouin Arabs as both foreign and completely Other to Western civilization. This semantic engagement with Orientalism, subsequently constructed the producers and readers of the English-language Arab American periodical as within the fold Western civilization. Throughout the article, for instance, *Syrian World* described Bedouin Arabs as brutal, violent, and lost to time. Conversely, the French, who as Syria's reigning colonial power ultimately intervened in the marital dispute, were portrayed as civilized saviors and preservers of the peace. The article opened with the following passage, which is telling of these various tropes:

The eternal forces of love and hatred, of injury and revenge, as intense and relentless as the heat of the desert sun, still exercise their sway among the Bedouin Arabs as in the remotest times of the past. Just as the mode of life of these sons of Ishmael has not changed for countless centuries, so have their characteristics, born of the hard life of their inhospitable surroundings, remained immutable. Even to our day and in the face of the great strides the world has made in science, invention and methods of transportation, we read of raids and feuds and wars of retaliation such as we are wont to find in the lore of the remotest ages.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ "Love and War in the Desert," 28, 30, and 34.

⁶⁶ "Love and War in the Desert," 27.

Of the tensions between the tribes over the marriage dispute, the article warned of the possibility of a war, but not just any war: “[W]ar as fierce and relentless as only the Arabs in their mad desire for revenge can wage.” The article continued:

Only the timely intervention of French armed forces comprising tanks, airplanes and artillery prevented a general clash. But the French admit that they have a serious problem on their hands in dealing with these untamed sons of the open sandy wastes who are still dominated by their age-old traditions and refuse to be appeased unless revenge is had in their own way.⁶⁷

Syrian World, therefore, sets up a binary between the backwards Bedouin Arabs and the civilized (and civilizing) French.

In some instances, *Syrian World* attempted to come off as more ethnographic, locating Bedouin modes of revenge within a specific cultural and social context:

Revenge among the nomads of the desert is a sacred tradition considered most essential for purposes of self-respect. It is to them an assertion of power that serves as warning to enemies that their attacks and depredations will not be permitted to go unpunished.⁶⁸

Revenge, according to this logic, is no necessarily rooted in barbarism but more of a survival strategy. However, understandings like these were few and far between. Directly following the above cited explanation for revenge, *Syrian World* slides back into an Orientalist mode of explanation:

This has been the law of the desert from time immemorial and no civilizing influence can eradicate from the breast of the bedouin this deeply-rooted tradition so long as he adheres to his roving instincts and is apparently far from the reach of organized agencies of the law.⁶⁹

Whereas Sheik Hadji Tahar promoted his career with abandon by indulging in the exoticism of Orientalism to its fullest extent, *Syrian World* engaged in the practice of self-Orientalism in a

⁶⁷ “Love and War in the Desert,” 27.

⁶⁸ “Love and War in the Desert,” 27-28.

⁶⁹ “Love and War in the Desert,” 28.

more strategic manner, marking some Arabs as part of Western civilization but others as foreign, barbaric, and lost to time.

A similar strategy was deployed throughout the 1920s by Arab American restaurant-owners. Following the release of *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, Arab Americans harnessed the popularity of the two films to market their culinary businesses, further demonstrating the extent to which self-Orientalization was utilized as a strategy by Arab Americans to successfully integrate their lives and careers into the growing consumer culture of the early twentieth century. This was, however, more than just a profit-making strategy. Luring in non-Arab clientele with exoticized cultural icons provided restaurant owners a rare opportunity to present themselves and their culture “authentically” to others and potentially remedy commonly-held negative misconceptions about Arabs currently living in the U.S.

Serving up the Sheik: Orientalism and Arab American Restaurants in the 1920s

One of the primary urban hubs for Arab immigration to the U.S. in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was New York City. The Manhattan neighborhood referred to as the “Syrian Colony” was a popular destination for predominantly Christian Arabs migrating from the Ottoman territory of Greater Syria (modern day Lebanon, Syria, Israel/Palestine, and Jordan). The Syrian Colony, or Little Syria as it was also called, was the cultural center of the Arab immigrant community in the U.S. It was, for example, home to literary figure Khalil Gibran and the publishing capital for most Arab American journals and newspapers in the period. It was also the site of a thriving entrepreneurial spirit and a variety of successful businesses.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ For more on the Syrian Colony, see: Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White* and Linda K. Jacobs, *Strangers in the West: The Syrian Colony of New York City, 1880-1900* (New York: Kalimah Press, 2015).

Two of these entrepreneurs were brothers Elias and John Kirdahy, who opened the Kirdahy Bros. Oriental Restaurant on Washington Street in 1913. Legend has it that Hollywood star John Barrymore regularly ate at the establishment and suggested the brothers change its name to “The Sheik” following the theatrical success of Valentino’s film in 1921. True or not, Elias and John did change the restaurant’s name to The Sheik at some point in the 1920s. Moreover, they were not the only Arab American restaurant-owners to do so in the wake of Valentino’s success. Numerous establishments, in cities like Detroit, Miami, and Jacksonville named their restaurants “The Sheik” or “Son of the Sheik.”⁷¹

This strategy was part of a larger social transformation taking place in the 1920s, as Arab American restaurant-owners found themselves catering to a larger, more culinary-adventurous non-Arab clientele. Utilizing popular exotic Hollywood imagery was, in part, a marketing strategy to reach a broader customer base; and yet, it was also more. Such a strategy, as Matthew Jaber Stiffler argues, represents:

[A] conscious engagement with U.S. popular culture representations of Arabs and the Arab world; a way of grafting the Arab American experience onto the Orientalist legacy of an exotic Arabness, in order to serve “authentic” food in an “authentic” environment.”⁷²

In other words, Arab Americans could selectively utilize Orientalism to broaden their customer base who they could subsequently re-educate through personal interaction and consumption. Such a strategy was recalled by James Myers in the pages of *Syrian World* after his visit to the Kirdahy brother’s Sheik Restaurant in March 1929. Of course, what constituted “authentic” Arab culture, or history, or identity, as we will see, was often determined by who was presenting it as such.

⁷¹ Stiffler, “Consuming Orientalism,” 111-112.

⁷² Stiffler, “Consuming Orientalism,” 112.

Myers was the Industrial Secretary of the Protestant umbrella organization, the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. In March of 1929 he joined a group led by Methodist Rev. Clarence V. Howell. Howell, along with Dr. George B. Dean, Secretary of the Department of Evangelism of the Methodist Episcopal Church, founded the practice of Reconciliation Trips. These were inter-faith and inter-racial group tours designed to expose their participants to diverse living and working environments. According Myers, these trips went to locales as varied as the urban ethnic enclaves of the “Chinese, Japanese, Russians, Italians, Mexicans, Latin Americans, to Negro Harlem and to the Jewish Ghetto.”⁷³ The purpose, in general, for Reconciliation Trips was to promote better understanding between the group and the community they were visiting. For the trip Myers was on, they would be visiting Little Syria in New York City.

The group itself represented an interesting cross-section of foreign and domestic participants from a variety of working backgrounds. As Myers notes:

They were college students from the graduate schools, for the most part, with a few professors, a minister or two, and some social workers. The students included a Negro, a Chinese, a Japanese, a French-woman, and a German, as well as Americans and others. There were Jews, Protestants and Catholics. We were about as interesting to each other and to the Syrians as they were to us.⁷⁴

After visiting a few shops, the group made its way to The Sheik restaurant to experience “a luncheon of native dishes” that included: stuffed grape leaves, dried squash, rice, okra, roasted lamb, Syrian bread, baklava, and Turkish coffee. Perhaps playing into the Protestant American obsession with the Holy Land, the group was informed that the loaves of Syrian bread “were

⁷³ James Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” *Syrian World* (March 1929), 32.

⁷⁴ Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” 30.

undoubtedly identical in form and substance with those broken by Jesus long ago on the shores of Galilee.”⁷⁵

Throughout the luncheon S. A. Mokarzel, editor of *Syrian World*, was available to address the Reconciliation tour and answer questions. His presence, essentially functioned as a public relations campaign for the predominantly Christian Syrian community. Mokarzel, for instance, “spoke of the hospitality of the east and assured us that this trait had been brought to America by his people.”⁷⁶ Similarly, he emphasized “the fact that the Syrians are a most law-abiding element in the population and are seldom found in the courts or jails.”⁷⁷ Finally, Mokarzel highlighted the entrepreneurial success of the Syrian community, tracking their economic climb from peddlers, to brick and mortar business owners, to participants in international trade and manufacturing. “For the opportunity of economic prosperity,” Mokarzel stated, “his people are deeply grateful to America.”⁷⁸ According to Myers, the Reconciliation Trip was successful for the Syrian American community. “No one in the group would be likely ever again to think of the Syrians as a despised foreigner,” he concluded.⁷⁹

“Deserts of Fact and Fancy”: Ameen Rihani Takes on the Hollywood Sheik

Despite these varied and nuanced productive engagements with Orientalism, sheiks, and desert romance, not all Arab Americans were as eager to adopt popular American understandings of their culture. In December 1929, for instance, Arab American literary icon Ameen Rihani

⁷⁵ Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” 31. For more on Protestant fascination with the Holy Land, see: McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 13-20 and Burke O. Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models, and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁷⁶ Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” 31.

⁷⁷ Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” 31.

⁷⁸ Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” 31.

⁷⁹ Myers, “Discovering the Syrians,” 31.

spoke out against these cultural tropes in an article titled “Deserts of Fact and Fancy.” Originally published on December 18 in the Sunday Magazine Section of the *New York Times*, the article was reprinted in the December 1929 issue of the English-language Arab American periodical, *Syrian World*. Throughout the article, Rihani lambastes the American obsession with:

The “sheik,” the harem of the “sheik,” the luxury and glamour of the desert dwelling of the “sheik,” and the little army of fierce-looking knights, on the swiftest dromedaries or the most fiery Arab steeds, in quest of the European girl for the harem of the “sheiks.”⁸⁰

While Rihani never used the phrase “sheikmania” in his article, we get the sense from the above passage that this was exactly the cultural phenomenon he was critiquing. His repeated use of the word “sheik,” which comes across as strategic, emphasized the all-pervasive and ever-present obsession with the sheik and his surroundings in American popular culture of the 1920s. Moreover, the repetition evokes a literary tone of disgust, which Rihani makes explicit throughout his article as he describes the Hollywood sheik as “poignantly pathetic” and, later, declares he has had “Enough of the absurdities.”⁸¹

Rihani understood the interest in romantic sheik narratives as an unhealthy desire produced by a consumerist society devoid of any direct experience with the real desert. He opens his article, for example, by proclaiming, “The desert has an irresistible fascination for those who have never been through it.” Shortly after, he deploys the image of a magical feast to drive home his point: “The novelist and the film producer wave a wand and lo, a banquet is spread for the eye and for starving hearts . . . They eat up the glamour, which satisfies a certain craving produced by civilization, and go home satisfied, fascinated.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Ameen Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” *Syrian World* (December 1929), 7.

⁸¹ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 7 and 9.

⁸² Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 5.

As suggested in his allusion to the feast of consumer society, Rihani does not lay sole blame for this obsession on the consumer. Much of his article, in fact, targets the producers of culture – novelists, filmmakers, artists, and musicians. Throughout the article, Rihani compares these individuals to magicians who at the wave of their wands cast a spell that transforms the “desert of fact” into a “desert of fancy.” “The artist casts his spell and the desert unfolds its mysteries,” Rihani contends. “But in the unfolding there is a wondrous transformation. The little black tent becomes a castle; the poor roving Bedouin becomes a ‘sheik’ ... the raids for daily bread become kidnapping parties; dangers are clothed in the glamour of adventure.”⁸³

Early in “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” Rihani describes the producers of American culture as “stewards of the public,” suggesting that he believes these individuals have a social responsibility to offer their audiences an accurate portrayal of the desert and its inhabitants.⁸⁴ Rihani then proceeds to offer a series of corrective edicts that would, in his own opinion, help better inform these cultural stewards. At one point, for instance, he engages in an etymological analysis of the word “sheik”:

It is not “sheik” but shaykh, which in Arabic means a venerable old man, or a man of learning or of authority. We speak of the Shaykh of Al-Azhar University, for instance, or the shaykh of a certain tribe. Among a few families of the Christians and Druzes [*sic.*] of Mount Lebanon, shaykh is also an inherited title.⁸⁵

Next, he attacks the American fascination with the sheik and his harem:

Even when a shaykh has a harem of two or three or even four wives, which is nowadays very rare, he cannot afford an ‘ensemble.’ He must segregate them or he is lost. For one woman alone is a problem, two together are an enigma, three or four are a conspiracy.⁸⁶

⁸³ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 6.

⁸⁴ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 5-6.

⁸⁵ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 7.

⁸⁶ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 8.

Deploying sexist humor, Rihani argues that the harem is not only a rarity anymore, but also a burden to any man willing to put up with more than one wife. Nor does the harem, at least those that exist in the desert, match the glamorized and titillating images perpetrated by Hollywood producers or French Orientalist painters like Jean-Leon Gérôme. That is to say, according to Rihani, one would never encounter naked or scantily-clad women lounging on satin sheets or bathing in large pools in the harem of the desert. To support his claim, Rihani offers a personal anecdote:

One Arab shaykh I knew had three wives, each one living in a separate compartment in the long black tent, but his wealth consisted only of a horse, a camel and a few sheep. “And how can you support your womenfolk?” I asked. “Allah be praised,” he replied, “it is by their help that I can keep the fire burning and the coffee brewing for the guests.”⁸⁷

The harem of the desert, as depicted by Rihani, was more likely to offer up a mundane scene of domestic tranquility than a Western sexual fantasy. “But such desert domesticity is too sordid for the screen,” notes Rihani. “We must have glamour, romance. We must have the thing that grips and thrills and enraptures.”⁸⁸

Following publication of Rihani’s article in the *New York Times*, American critic and clergyman Henry van Dyke wrote to the author, praising the article and agreeing with Rihani that the “Hollywood ‘Sheik’ is an abomination to God and Man, a fraud.”⁸⁹ How many Americans were inclined to agree with van Dyke and Rihani is hard to determine. However, given the long-seated American fascination with desert romance and the mass proliferation of sheikmania in the 1920s, it is safe to conclude their opinions were most likely in the minority. This was, as I have demonstrated, an obsession that crossed the racial boundaries of the late-nineteenth and early-

⁸⁷ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 8.

⁸⁸ Rihani, “Deserts of Fact and Fancy,” 8.

⁸⁹ Portions of van Dyke’s letter are quoted in a footnote in the *Syrian World* publication of Rihani’s article.

twentieth centuries, Arab Americans being no exception. When the Arab sheik quickly became a dominant symbol of American culture in the 1920s, he would play a significant role in the cultural and social lives of African Americans as well, a point which I explore further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Black Sheiks, Colored Valentinos: African Americans, Rudolph Valentino, and the Jazz Age Sheik, 1921-1930

In 1934, the prominent black anthropologist and Harlem Renaissance icon, Zora Neal Hurston, published an essay titled “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” Throughout the article, Hurston explored the ways that African Americans engaged with, adopted, and reinterpreted white culture. “While [the Negro] lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization,” observed Hurston, “everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.”¹ As one contemporary scholar has noted, Hurston’s essay “repeatedly emphasizes the transformative value of vernacular cultural reworkings of the dominant culture’s artifacts.”² In other words, as white culture was foisted upon America’s black inhabitants, they found ways to usefully reappropriate that culture to their own, oftentimes very limited, advantage. In Hurston’s own words, “[The American negro] has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country, just as he adapted to suit himself the Sheik haircut made famous by Rudolph Valentino.”³ Hurston’s last comment points towards the ways in which African Americans in the 1920s utilized mass entertainment as an institution through which they might better understand themselves and improve their social position in the United States. But

¹ Zora Neal Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in *Negro: An Anthology* (1934), abridged edition, edited by Nancy Cunard and Hugh Ford, 24-31 (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1996), 28.

² Wahneema Lubiano, “Mapping the Interstices between Afro-American Cultural Discourse and Cultural Studies: A Prolegomenon,” *Callaloo* 19, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 71.

³ Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” 28.

what was it specifically about Valentino's hair style – close-cropped on the sides and back but longer on the top and often slicked back and to the side – that spoke to black men, so much so that Hurston would include it alongside religion, medicine, and food as worthy of note?

Hurston's observation about black men's appropriation of Valentino's hairstyle signals two interrelated historical trends that I will explore throughout this chapter. First, following the release of Valentino's film *The Sheik* in 1921, the word *sheik* itself, which, as noted in this dissertation's introduction, was often pronounced like the word *chic*, began to take on new meanings. In addition to signifying a white-robed desert Arab leader, like in the film, the word began to denote a certain sense of masculine style and attitude that came to be associated with Valentino and his image as a celebrity. This new definition often had seemingly very little to do with the romantic and Orientalist roots from which it grew and evolved. As a piece of 1920s slang, the word *sheik* was quite adaptable. It could be used as an adjective, a noun, and even a verb. To be sheik was to be suave, cool, stylish, charming, alluring, and sexually liberal. A young man identified as a sheik was often clean-shaven, well-dressed, and overall attentive to his appearances. He was often physically fit, but not necessarily rugged. Exceptionally smooth with women, whom he often dated with abandon, the modern sheik could be found at all the favorite haunts of the rebellious youth of America's Jazz Age: the dance hall, the speakeasy, and the "petting" party. Given his propensity to pursue more than just one woman at a time, the word *sheik* even operated as a verb which meant to "get around" or to cheat on one's significant other. For all intents and purposes, the modern sheik was, the male equivalent to that decade's most famous gendered stereotype: the youthful, rebellious, and libertine "flapper."⁴

⁴ Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 30.

Throughout the decade, then, the word *sheik* could just as likely describe the flapper's counterpart as it could a desert Arab chieftain who was lifted from the pages or the screen of the latest desert romance. While Valentino's image played a key role in mobilizing the varied meanings of the word *sheik*, there was, more often than not, very little cross over between either definition. Despite their stemming from a common root, the Arab sheik and the modern Jazz Age sheik were thought of as two distinct ontological categories. Regardless of this distinction, however, both types of sheik were significant for myriad reasons to black men and women in the 1920s. Moreover, as I argue throughout this chapter, African Americans would play a unique and central role in this modern re-branding of the word *sheik*, adapting these new definitions, as Hurston noted, to suit their own varied personal and social historical circumstances.

Several recent academic works have begun to uncover the significance of Valentino, *The Sheik*, and the modern Jazz Age sheik to African Americans in the 1920s. Mark Lynn Anderson's *Twilight of the Idols* (2011), for instance, points towards the ways that Valentino's image as an ethnic star "opened the possibility for diverse mobilizations and appropriations of his identity." Anderson notes how the prominent black silent film director Oscar Micheaux billed actor Lorenzo Tucker as the "colored Valentino" to better advertise their films to a mixed-race audience. Anderson also highlights the resistance that black conservatives had to the mass veneration of a film star like Valentino. When former Harvard College president Charles William Elliot passed away a day before Valentino's untimely death in August 1926, a prominent black newspaper bemoaned the lack of coverage in the black press concerning Elliot's death in comparison to Valentino's. Whereas Elliot was a progressive intellectual deeply concerned with the cause of racial justice, noted the *New York Amsterdam News*, Valentino was a matinee idol who simply posed before a "clicking camera." For some black conservatives, the

fixation on Valentino's death and funeral in the black press represented the loss of civic virtue indicative of a new culture of celebrity wrought by the burgeoning mass media industry based out of Hollywood.⁵

Whereas Anderson's research in *Twilight of the Idols* focuses specifically upon Valentino, Fiona I. B. Ngô's *Imperial Blues* (2014) notes the historical ways in which the word *sheik* was used to label and describe new forms of masculinity in the 1920s Jazz Age culture of New York City. Ngô excavates the presence of this new and alluring American character in popular songs like "He Wasn't Born in Araby, but He's a Sheikin' Fool" (1924) and "In Harlem's Araby" (1924) as well as in Carl Van Vetchen's novel, *Nigger Heaven* (1926). She discovers a new type of sheik removed from the exotic environs of the Orient and placed in the domestic space of Harlem. Yet, he was still just as dangerously alluring as Valentino's Ahmed Ben Hassan. "[H]e don't know what a harem is," as the lyrics of one song went, "[but] every lover [says] he knows his biz." Moreover, this was a sheik who was very much entrenched in the Jazz Age culture of 1920s New York City, as the song "In Harlem's Araby" made clear: "In Harlem's Araby / The funniest things you'll see / Yes, sheiks that do not live in tents / Jamming all night to pay their rent." Overall, *Imperial Blues* highlights some of the ways that word *sheik* was utilized throughout the 1920s "both to condemn and to celebrate ... the sexual excessiveness and moral shortcomings" of America's Jazz Age youth.⁶

In this chapter, I build upon Anderson and Ngô's research, filling in some of the historiographical gaps in their scholarship. While both do a good job highlighting the historical links between blackness, Valentino, and new forms of masculinity in American culture of the

⁵ Mark Lynn Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols: Hollywood and the Human Sciences in 1920s America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 85 and 125-127.

⁶ Fiona I. B. Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 65, 125, and 149-150.

1920s, neither *Twilight of the Idols* nor *Imperial Blues* provide a satisfactory analysis of the complex ways that African Americans fostered, understood, celebrated, as well as contested these cultural connections. For instance, outside of his very brief discussion of Lorenzo Tucker (the “colored Valentino”) and the *New York Amsterdam News*’ critical analysis of Valentino’s death, Anderson provides no other empirical evidence that would demonstrate the complex ways that black cultural consumers and producers made meaning out of Valentino’s celebrity. Likewise Ngô’s analysis of the Jazz Age sheik, rooted in her engagement with Tin Pan Alley songs and Von Vetchen’s *Nigger Heaven*, really only gives us a sense of how Jewish immigrants and white cultural elites with ties to the Harlem Renaissance, aided in the construction of this cultural icon.⁷

Utilizing historical black newspapers like the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, and *Baltimore Afro-American* this chapter uncovers the long overlooked black voices that were central to the evolution and debates surrounding American sheikmania of the 1920s. Throughout, I explore not only *how* African Americans, primarily those located in the urban north, engaged with these cultural icons in the 1920s, but also *why* they did so. If, to paraphrase Hurston, African Americans have historically reinterpreted the culture of white civilization for their own use, then it is important to ask why they did so and what sorts of values Valentino and the figure of the sheik had to them? Phrased differently, we might ask, what meanings did black cultural producers and consumers attach to these symbols of 1920s American popular culture? What contributions did African Americans make to the changing meaning of the word *sheik*? How did these cultural icons and trends fit into

⁷ This is not true of all of Ngô’s research in *Imperial Blues* – only in her specific analysis of the Jazz Age sheik.

post-Reconstruction debates and conversations regarding black culture and identity as well as black values and morality?

In this chapter, I first demonstrate that both *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* were immensely popular films with black film audiences in the 1920s. I partially attribute this popularity to the historical and strategic ways in which African Americans had co-opted dominant modes of American Orientalism to suit their own needs. Just as Orientalism, the figure of the Arab sheik, as well as the vast and open desert were mobilized by white men and women as a means to accomplish liberation from the social and economic constraints of the nineteenth century, so too did African Americans emotionally and cultural invest in these signs as a means to express their desire for greater freedom at home, even as such freedom took on different meanings for blacks living in a post-emancipation and post-Reconstruction U.S.

Ultimately, however, it was Valentino, more so than the exotic and liberating Orient, that represented the real drawing power of *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*. The extent to which black newspapers from the 1920s discussed Valentino and his career reveals that the films' star had a large cult following among black women and men. Valentino's well-documented sex appeal, of course, played no small part in establishing for the star a devoted female fan base among black women. Like their white counterparts, black women openly expressed sexual desire for Valentino, challenging traditional gender and racial norms established to police their behavior in previous decades. Yet, it was Valentino's appeal to black men that really set African American reactions to the film star apart. In addition to Lorenzo Tucker, numerous other black celebrities were billed and described as "Colored Valentinos." Moreover, as the word *sheik* quickly began to operate as a surrogate for *suave*, *cool*, *sexy*, or any other attribute Valentino seemed to exude, it too filtered into the promotional discourses of black celebrities. The northern and urban black

press of 1920s was loaded with accounts of sheik actors, sheik musicians, and sheik athletes. To be a sheik was to exhibit a certain style and attitude, neither of which, it should be mentioned, were foreclosed to ordinary black men. Throughout the decade, advice columns and advertisements marketed ideas and material goods to the aspiring sheik, regardless of his occupation. These ranged from dating advice to fashionable attire. Valentino, then, was at the root of a popular and modern idea of black masculinity that was being forged in the growing urban areas of 1920s America.

Of course, Valentino was not without his detractors. As popular as he was with black women and men throughout the decade, both the film star and the modern sheik style of masculinity he inspired evoked as much criticism as they did praise. For some black critics, Valentino represented a burgeoning national culture that was superficial, vain, anti-intellectual, amoral, if not immoral, and far too secular. In short, Valentino became a figurehead for modernity and a public target for many conservative African Americans who located black success not in an assimilation to the supposed values espoused by mass entertainment but rather in more traditional and respectable notions of identity and social formation. For these critics, Valentino did not offer a model of masculinity worthy of emulation, but, rather, was a powerful scapegoat that could easily and conveniently signal and explain the crumbling of the traditional, post-Reconstruction, Victorian ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family. Moreover, within this discourse, the Jazz Age sheik became synonymous with urban crime. To be a sheik, according to these critics, was to lead a fast and hard life of infidelity, crime, and loose morals. If African Americans were to make any racial progress, some argued, they would do well to reject the modern, mass culture that was being foisted upon themselves.

Like Mark Lynn Anderson, I too contend that Valentino's racial ambiguity allowed him to cross over as a film star to black audiences. It was this ambiguity that contributed to the diverse and often contradictory reactions that African Americans had both to Valentino as well as the modern sheik style of masculinity he inspired. As such, Valentino and the sheik operated as powerful symbols through which African Americans could discuss, debate, and negotiate new and traditional expressions of black identity, culture, and morality in a rapidly changing and modernizing U.S. For some they represented innovative and empowering forms of mimicry that would allow black men and women access to American culture while simultaneously allowing them to carve out their own path in an often oppressive and harsh racial environment. Others, however, understood the acceptance of Valentino's sheik style not as an empowering form of mimicry, as Zora Neale Hurston had argued, but rather an adoption of the worst and most superficial characteristics of modern white culture. Some critics even pointed toward the very real dangers, especially in the Jim Crow South, of strutting around town in the flashy and boisterous style of the Jazz Age sheik. Yet, some also saw in Valentino the hope that race relations might someday improve in the U.S., noting that if an Italian Catholic immigrant could make it in xenophobic Protestant America, then surely things must be getting better. To better understand the complex set of meanings that African Americans attached to Valentino and the figure of the sheik in the 1920s, however, it is first important to lay out the historical grounds upon which these debates took place.

Historical Changes in the American Jazz Age:

The subject of this chapter lies at the crossroads of a variety of historical trends that impacted both the U.S. broadly as well as African Americans specifically. As such, I have

devoted considerable space here to lay out the historical contexts that will help us understand *how* and *why* African Americans could find such diverse meanings in the life and career of Rudolph Valentino. The 1920s witnessed the culmination of a variety of social, cultural, and economic trends that dated back to the previous century. This decade has been referred to, both popularly and academically, as the “Jazz Age,” a label which is not without its problems but, nonetheless, a useful descriptor of the period.⁸ Originally coined by novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1922, the Jazz Age earned its name not only due to the popularity and flourishing of that style of music throughout the 1920s but also because of the stock historical images of the period that jazz seems to evoke: swanky urban nightclubs and mixed-gender dancing; prohibition, speakeasies, and urban gangsters; youthful flappers rebelling against the Victorian gender norms of their parents’ generation; exciting and vibrant music that could reach a burgeoning national consumer market by way of commercial radio and mass recorded albums.⁹ And while many of these images and characters are most definitely stereotyped generalizations of the period, they nonetheless serve the purpose of standing in for the much larger and more complex historical shifts that had been taking place in the U.S. since the late-nineteenth century: urbanization and industrialization; foreign immigration and internal migration; changing gender norms and sexual mores; the growth of secularism and urban crime; mass production, modern advertising, and the expansion of consumer capitalism; as well as the expansion of a mass market for new forms of entertainment like recorded music and nationally-distributed Hollywood cinema. All these factors had been contributing to the creation of a rapidly-changing and modern America that

⁸ While historians debate the precise temporal parameters encompassed by the phrase “Jazz Age,” I, like some historians, use it in this chapter as a surrogate descriptor of the 1920s. For more about debates concerning the chronology of the Jazz Age, see: Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, xiv-xv.

⁹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tales of the Jazz Age* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922).

was, more than any other time in its history, linked together, though by no means ideologically unified, through ever-expanding national circuits of culture, migration, and commerce.¹⁰

In this period, for instance, Americans were increasingly congregating in growing urban areas. As historians Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber note, the 1920s U.S. Census revealed that “for the first time in the nation’s history more than half of all Americans lived in cities or towns of 2,500 or more people.”¹¹ The numbers were bolstered primarily by the historical waves of European immigration and southern black internal migration which began in the late nineteenth century. Many rural whites, too however, fell into the orbit of urban America, drawn by an increasing abundance of manufacturing jobs as well as newer forms of white collar and managerial work for the more educated classes. Whether one came from Europe, the south, or the rural north, the exposure to new cultures and forms of recreation in the city, coupled with the mass uprooting from traditional social and familial ties that accompanied migration, led to significant social and cultural shifts in the U.S., many of which culminated in and around the 1920s. Moreover, the increased circulation of mass forms of communication and entertainment, like newsprint, the radio, and cinema, led to a homogenization of these cultural and social trends that spanned the nation in ways unthinkable to past generations of Americans.¹²

Additionally, technological renovations in the manufacturing industry coupled with labor union activism changed the working lives of many, but certainly not all, Americans. Shorter work days and higher wages meant that more Americans were finding they had both more time and more money to spend on leisure. Whereas Americans of previous generations placed a high value on thrift, a variety of factors (increased wages, the birth of modern advertising, the

¹⁰ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, xv.

¹¹ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, xv.

¹² Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, xv.

introduction of installment plans and widespread access to credit), encouraged Americans to spend and indulge, ushering in a modern era of consumer capitalism. The increasing prevalence of mass produced and distributed consumer goods and the national circulation of culture via Hollywood cinema, radio, magazines, and newsprint were also opening up new modes of identity formation for many Americans, who increasingly defined themselves in relation to the things they bought and their ability to keep up with national fads.¹³

As historian Martin Summers notes, the gradual shift from a producer-oriented society to a consumer-oriented one between the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century had social and cultural ramifications, especially for traditional middle class notions of masculinity. In this period, notes Summer:

A modern ethos of masculinity supplanted earlier nineteenth-century notions of manliness that characterized society dominated by Victorian values. Manhood became less defined by production (or engagement in the marketplace), character, respectability, and the producer values of industry, thrift, regularity, and temperance. Rather, middle-class Americans increasingly ... began to define it in terms of consumption. One's manhood became more and more defined by the consumer goods one owned, the leisure practices one engaged in, and one's physical and sexual virility.¹⁴

Of course, more traditional notions of masculinity never truly went away, as Summers concedes. Nonetheless, a clear and definitive cultural tension existed as personality (as defined by one's relationship to consumer goods and contemporary, national popular culture) competed with character (as defined by one's adherence to traditional and, sometimes, local or regional practices and beliefs) as the primary indicator of modern masculine ethos.¹⁵

¹³ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 51-52 and 143.

¹⁴ Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 8.

¹⁵ In addition to Summers' *Manliness and its Discontents*, see: Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13 and M. S. Kimmel, "Consuming Manhood: The Feminization of American Culture and the Recreation of the Male Body," 1832-1920," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 33, no. 1 (1994): 7-36.

Women, too, were impacted by these economic and cultural transformations, and many participated in the growing consumer culture and defined themselves in relation to the things they bought or the national trends they followed. The decades leading up to the 1920s, however, were also marked by an increasing presence of women in the traditionally male-dominated public sphere. More women began to enter the workforce, albeit in low paying jobs and often out of economic necessity or to fill labor gaps in key industries during World War I. Continuing education at a College or University was becoming a much more common option for women as well, even if it was assumed that after, a woman was to get married rather than pursue a career. 1920 also witnessed the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, granting women the constitutional right to vote in elections. For many, though certainly not all, women, the 1920s marked a period of finite, but significant, liberalization in prescriptive gender norms.¹⁶

Women who labored for these changes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often referred to as “New Women.” However, by end of the First World War, a new type of femininity began to sweep the nation: “the flapper.” While this 1920s emblem of female youth culture shared in some similarities with her predecessor, she differed on several accounts from the previous generation’s New Woman. The flapper, for instance, mobilized both fashion and lifestyle to rebel against patriarchal social norms. Her shortened hemline, plunging neckline, and excessive jewelry were an open challenge to earlier generations’ notions of female propriety. The flapper stayed out late, smoked in public, and drank alcohol. She used social dancing and jazz music to explore her sexuality. Some took advantage of new improvements in birth control to engage in premarital sex; while others rejected marriage and monogamy outright.¹⁷

¹⁶ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 17-19.

¹⁷ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 17-19 and 30.

As gender norms for men and women underwent change in this period, so too did relationships between the genders. The introduction of modern forms of birth control and more liberal divorce laws certainly gave Americans greater freedom to indulge in sexual experimentation with far fewer biological and social consequences than their parents' generation had faced. Moreover, since the late-nineteenth century, the increasing prevalence of jazz and dance clubs, movie theaters, and automobiles, provided new social spaces where younger Americans could escape the watchful eyes of their parents. The 1920s, then, witnessed the transformation from more traditional forms of supervised courtship to a modern dating culture. To be sure, instances of premarital sex did increase in this period, though never as much as the concerned proprietors of traditional Victorian values claimed. Truth is, many of the couples who did engage in premarital sex were already engaged to be married. Moreover, others found alternative methods to experiment with sexuality prior to marriage. Many youth, for instance, attended what were referred to in the period as "petting parties." Petting, according to Drowne and Huber, involved "kissing, hugging, and caressing of varying intensity." At a petting party, one could explore sexuality with one or more partners without resorting to intercourse.¹⁸

It was out of these cultural, social, geographic, and economic changes that the Jazz Age sheik would manifest. Like the female flapper, the sheik represented a new and controversial form of masculinity that had become available to men for most of 1920s. Originally inspired by Rudolph Valentino's 1921 hit film, *The Sheik*, this new form of masculinity had little-to-nothing to do with the romanticized and Orientalist aesthetics of the film itself, and more to do with the film's leading man. In the historical discourses surrounding his celebrity, Valentino was presented as a suave, sophisticated, and stylish ladies' man. Many of the qualities that fueled the

¹⁸ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 18 and 44-46.

anti-Valentino hatred of conservative Anglo American males, then, made him equally popular as a man worth emulating, especially among those, often younger, males seduced by the modern, consumer and personality-based style of masculinity being popularized in the Jazz Age. To be a sheik, then, one should buy and wear the latest fashions of clothing and male cosmetic products as well as listen to jazz music and know all the latest and ever-changing popular dances. He was accustomed to social events where liquor was served in defiance of prohibition and up on the latest changes to vernacular slang. The modern sheik was also sexually liberal and aggressive in his pursuit of women.¹⁹

It is easy to see why Valentino provided such an appropriate role model for this new, Jazz Age style of masculinity. He was considered attractive and fashionable; married and divorced several times; and, since his breakout motion picture, *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), he was consistently cast to play leading romantic roles. But why was it *The Sheik*, in particular, that inspired the name for this new mode of manhood, especially if the label itself was to be stripped of its Orientalist connotations? While no historical evidence has come to light that would give us a direct and empirically-grounded answer, a couple of speculations are worth considering. First off, the vernacular American pronunciation of the word *sheik* as *chic* certainly would have lent itself towards evoking the fashionable sense of cool that accompanied contemporaneous usage of the word. Moreover, while *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* may have been Valentino's first role as a romantic lead, it was most certainly *The Sheik* that solidified his sexual reputation. Composer Jack Frost's 1922 jazz song, "Rodolph Valentino Blues," offered testament to the significance of *The Sheik* in this regard. Frost, who does not mention

¹⁹ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 30 and 43-44.

another one of Valentino's films in the entire song, wrote: "I saw you playing 'Heavy lover' out on the desert of Sahara in 'The Sheik.'"20

Of course not all men and women embraced this new style of masculinity, a point which I examine later in this chapter as it relates specifically to conservative African Americans. Just as many Anglo American males vehemently rejected Valentino, so too did some Americans complain about youthful men and women acting like sheiks and flappers, the latter of which were also referred to as "shebas" during the 1920s. In an address to the American Institute of Homeopathy in Chicago, for instance, Dr. A. W. LaForge went so far as to classify this cultural phenomenon as a "virulent modern disease." Both sheiks and shebas, according to the doctor, were "addicted" to fashion and "characterized by a violent aversion to work."²¹ Such a response was indicative of the ways that age, more so than in previous decades, was becoming a significant marker of social difference. Huber and Drowne argue that the 1920s witnessed the "first significant 'generation gap'" in the U.S. A variety of historical factors account for this. Central to this chapter, though, was the migration of Americans from more rural and traditional communities into the urban, industrialized metropolitan centers which were much more connected to the rapid changes being wrought by mass culture. While older Americans living in the city might look nostalgically upon their small-town roots to find refuge in a rapidly changing world, many younger Americans, at least those living in the city, were much more quick to embrace modernity and the new forms of socialization that came in its wake.²²

Americans throughout the 1920s, then, were quite familiar with the sheik, even if they did not necessarily condone the new style of masculinity he evoked. Modern sheiks appeared in

²⁰ Jack Frost, "Rodolph Valentino Blues," sheet music (New York: Jack Mills, 1922), Frances G. Spencer Collection of American Popular Sheet Music, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/> (accessed June 7, 2018).

²¹ "Sheiks and Shebas," *Los Angeles Times* (July 26, 1923): II 4.

²² Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, xvi, 29, and 39-40.

everything from Hollywood films to jazz music. Paramount's *Prodigal Daughters* (1923), a "modern society drama" about the Greenwich Village youth, for instance, was said to have featured scenes of "parlor parties as indulged in by our sheiks and shebas."²³ Likewise, First National's *Joanna* (1925) took on similar themes. *Motion Picture News* described it as a "colorful and lavishly mounted drama that mirrors our jazz-mad age in all its realism." *Joanna* was said to have pictured "many of the activities of our ultra modern sheiks and shebas." These included: "Petting, necking, drinking, dancing a la Charleston, [and] wild parties." "Not a picture for family consumption," warned *Motion Picture News*.²⁴ Hollywood also produced a number of comedic shorts, which it advertised as "sheiks and shebas comedies," sought to portray the "Haps and Mishaps of Flapper Americans."²⁵ The Buster Keaton comedy, *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), too, featured a character named "The Local Sheik" (Ward Crane). Dressed in a three-piece pinstriped suit, the sheik temporarily swoops in and woos Keaton's love interest. When Keaton is accused of stealing the woman's father's pocket watch, he sets out to prove the truth: that it was, in actuality the local sheik, that committed the crime. While a lighthearted comedy, *Sherlock Jr.*, pointed towards the ways that, for some Americans, the sheik came to signify the growing problem of urban crime. This topic will be explored further below as the link between sheik masculinity and urban crime, both real and imagined, was a popular topic within the 1920s black press.

Hollywood was not the only cultural institution to explore this new form of masculinity. Jazz musicians too composed songs that explored the "magnetic sexual power" of the urban sheik.²⁶ Jack Yellen and Milton Ager, for instance, wrote a jazz tune titled "Lovin' Sam (The

²³ "Prodigal Daughters," Film Review, *Motion Picture News* (April 28, 1923), 2059.

²⁴ "Joanna," Film Review, *Motion Picture News* (December 26, 1925), 3207.

²⁵ "Comedies DeLAUGH: 'Sheiks and Shebas,'" Advertisement, *Exhibitors Trade Review* (December 26, 1925), 7.

²⁶ Ngô, *Imperial Blues*, 149.

Sheik of Alabam),” which told about the sexual exploits of the “mean love mak-in’ a heart break-in’ man!” Everywhere Sam went, it seemed, women swooned and husbands found themselves divorced. While lovin’ Sam’s racial identity was never explicitly stated in the song, it was made clear that he had the most appeal with “high-brown gal[s].”²⁷ As I will demonstrate shortly, Valentino as well as this modern sheik masculinity were, for a variety of reasons, significant to African American men and women throughout the 1920s. To better understand both *how* and *why* this was so, it is important to say a few words on the historical context in which these discussions took place.

African Americans in the 1920s

While much of the growth of a popular national culture in this period can be explained by technological innovations in mass entertainment, ultimately, it was the growth of a consumer-minded middle class, with leisure time and disposable incomes, that economically sustained the growth of such a culture. The 1920s would most definitely bear witness to the growth of such a class within black communities across the U.S., albeit at an exponentially slower rate than in white and ethnic European immigrant communities. Living in the shadow of emancipation, the failure of Reconstruction, the economic instabilities of sharecropping and tenant farming, as well as the persistent and extreme racial violence and *de jure* segregation of the Jim Crow south, many black Americans began relocating to the burgeoning urban, industrial centers that were flourishing to the north. This Great Migration began in the 1890s and saw large waves of southern African Americans populate metropolitan areas like Kansas City and St. Louis in the

²⁷ Jack Yellen and Milton Anger, “Lovin’ Sam (The Sheik of Alabam),” sheet music (New York: Ager, Yellen, and Bornstein, 1922), Frances G. Spencer Collection of American Popular Sheet Music, <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/> (accessed June 7, 2018).

borders states; Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh to the north, as well as Los Angeles out west. Migration increased drastically around 1916 with the outbreak of World War I which curtailed European immigration to the U.S. and led to labor shortages in northern factories, which relied heavily on cheap immigrant labor. As a result, northern industrial agents traveled south to actively recruit black labor. In the north, black workers were often excluded from trade unions, their wages were comparably lower than those of white counterparts, and they were almost always the first to be let go or see reduced hours when their employer fell on hard times. Moreover, they had to contend with *de facto* segregation as a result of housing discrimination as well as deadly race riots that could flare up at any moment such as those that swept across numerous American cities in the Red Summer of 1919. Despite these conditions, the north still provided economic, educational, and social opportunities rarely available to southern blacks. As a result, over half-a-million would migrate out of the south between 1915-1919. Another 700,000 to one-million would follow throughout the 1920s.²⁸

The experience in the urban north, full of new-found opportunities alongside both new and familiar forms of oppression, led many African Americans in the industrial north to embark on a “radical self-reinvention” of modern black identity.²⁹ While some, such as followers of Jamaican immigrant Marcus Garvey, advocated for racial separatism and a return to Africa, many others sought to find identities that were authentically black while simultaneously fighting for full integration into American society. Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) fought for equal civil and political rights. Artists,

²⁸ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 9; James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1-4; and Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2-7.

²⁹ Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 108-109.

poets, and authors of the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement explored new urban identities and found beauty in blackness. Anthropologists and academics, such as Hurston, began to uncover the rich history and culture from which they came. Sociologists and social workers studied and commented upon urban living conditions as well as everyday practices related to sex, child-rearing, and household maintenance. Musicians contributed heavily to the development of blues and jazz music in the period, and filmmakers, like Oscar Micheaux of Chicago, produced “race films” that were made by and for African Americans. “Race pride” and “racial destiny” were the buzz words of the era.³⁰ How exactly one expressed pride in his or her race or ensured a prosperous racial destiny was a hotly debated topic that directly impacted black relationships to Valentino and the Jazz Age sheiks. In their varied and diverse discussions of these topics, as I demonstrate, we see African Americans debating the extent to which they should integrate and invest their lives, money, and subjectivities into a mass culture that was largely controlled by white Anglo Americans and ethnic European immigrants.

Black Sheiks, Colored Valentinos:

Throughout the 1920s, *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, not to mention Valentino in general, proved to be as popular and controversial with black theatergoers as they did with white audiences. In 1922, Baltimore’s Roosevelt Theater took great pride in its ability to secure a copy of *The Sheik*, which was, as noted in the *Afro-American*, still being screened in “first-class white theaters” across the country.³¹ In general, both films received high praise in the black press. The

³⁰ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 9-13; Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents*, 5-6; and Michelle Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

³¹ Roosevelt, *Baltimore Afro-American* (January 27, 1922), 4.

New York Amsterdam News, for example, declared *The Sheik* to be a “remarkable production.”³² The *Chicago Defender* described Agnes Ayers, who played Diana Mayo, as “talented and beautiful” and Valentino as a “brilliant young screen player.”³³ The *Afro-American*, moreover billed *Son of the Sheik* as “the most colorful vehicle in Valentino’s career.”³⁴ So popular was the Italian immigrant film star and his two desert romances that, in the days and years following Valentino’s unexpected and premature death in 1926, black patrons in New York would successfully lobby local theater managers to purchase and screen what they believed were his two greatest films: *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*.³⁵

Screenings of both films at all-black theaters were well-attended, often for reasons similar, but not necessarily analogous, to the reasons that the films did so well with white patrons. The sweeping scenery, open desert, and adventurous plots, for instance, played into romanticized notions about the supposed freedom of Bedouin Arabs. Writing, in general, about her perception of Bedouin life, Eve Lynn of the *Pittsburgh Courier* repeated many of the romantic notions espoused by Anglo men in the nineteenth century:

[I]n a far off land of red suns and burning white sands, where the palm trees sway, full and green against an azure sky of blue, there lives the sheik, the leader, the keeper of his tribe, he lives a life of perfect freedom and happiness.³⁶

No surprise, then, that in its review of *The Sheik*, the *Chicago Defender* praised the film’s “magnificent and spectacular settings,” which included a “picturesque African oasis,” “complete Arabian village,” and “exotic interiors.”³⁷

³² “Rodolph Valentino Delighted with ‘The Sheik.’” *New York Amsterdam News* (April 11, 1923), 4.

³³ “Agnes Ayers, Star, Is Featured in ‘The Sheik,’” *Chicago Defender* (December 17, 1921), 5.

³⁴ “The Son of the Sheik,” Film Review, *Baltimore Afro-American* (February 19, 1927), 10.

³⁵ “Valentino Picture at the Renaissance Theater: Death of Famous Italian Brings Back His Past Successes,” *New York Amsterdam News* (September 15, 1926), 11 and “Valentino Lives Again in Picture at Douglas,” *New York Amsterdam News* (August 20, 1930), 9.

³⁶ Eve Lynn, Eve Lynn Chats ‘Bout Society and Folk, *Pittsburgh Courier* (January 24, 1925), 11.

³⁷ “The Sheik,” Film Review, *Chicago Defender* (December 10, 1921), 6.

As other scholars have noted, African Americans have always had their own cultural and symbolic relationships with the Orient. This “Afro-Orientalism,” as Bill V. Mullen has labeled it, might at times mirror more traditional Orientalism in its aesthetics and discourse. However, this does not necessarily mean that either produced analogous meanings for blacks and whites. In the face of a racially discriminating society, African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for instance, utilized images and ideas about Ancient Egypt to symbolically reclaim a “monumental African past” that was denied to them by white society.³⁸ In the words of Fiona I. B. Ngô, Egypt represented for many African Americans “an alternate seat of civilization and progress to ancient Greece and Rome.”³⁹ While the use of Egypt as a symbol often tied into broader Afrocentric cultural and political trends, it could just as easily be mobilized to radically undermine racial divisions and call for global solidarity between oppressed peoples the world-over. In his poem, “The Riddle of the Sphinx,” for instance, W. E. B. DuBois found solidarity with the “black men of Egypt and India, / Ethiopia’s sons of the evening / Indians and yellow Chinese, / Arabian children of morning, / And mongrels of Rome and Greece.”⁴⁰

Afro-Orientalist attitudes toward Egypt, then, served the political and social goals of some African Americans. As a discourse, it was mobilized in ways that could both undermine the white supremacy that sustained the idea of Western civilization all the while making the case of greater black inclusion into that same civilization. A similar dichotomy was present in contemporaneous discourses surrounding *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* in the black press. On the one hand, film reviews reveal an awareness of the ways that Anglo Americans had romanticized the desert and the sheik as symbols of liberty, mobilizing language and imagery

³⁸ Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xxxv.

³⁹ Ngô, *Imperial Blues*, 172.

⁴⁰ Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism*, xxxv.

that was remarkably similar to that of their white contemporaries. However, while Anglo and African American cultural consumers may have turned towards the Orient to satisfy their desires for “perfect freedom and happiness,” to quote Lynn from above, they did not necessarily always do so for the same reasons. True, increasing urbanization and the onslaught of industrial capitalism may have given the desert and its Bedouin inhabitants a certain cultural appeal to whites and blacks alike. But, Afro-Orientalism also had to contend with the history, and in some instances literal memory of slavery, not to mention slavery’s salient legacy: legalized Jim Crow in the south and general forms of racialized violence and discrimination in both north and south. The desire for “perfect freedom and happiness” might have been present for both black and white cultural consumers. However, the obstacles standing in the way could, at times, be quite unique to the racial identities of those consumers. It should come as no surprise that many African Americans, then, took delight in *The Sheik*, a film that, ultimately, concludes with Ahmed’s defeat of the slave-owning villain, Omair. How many black film spectators invested in such a politically and socially motivated reading of *The Sheik* we many never know. Black journalists and film critics never explicitly wrote about the film in that way. Nonetheless, the potential for such a reading to have existed is evident both in the film’s narrative as well as the ways that film reviews mimicked the discursive modes of romantic Anglo Orientalism.

What is abundantly evident, though, was the sex appeal of a film like *The Sheik* to black film audiences. Just as with white spectators, films like *The Sheik* were sexually titillating to black audiences, offering the chance to indulge in harem fantasies of sexual excess. For instance, when Baltimore’s Carey Theater screened *The Sheik*, it advertised not only the film’s romantic and adventurous plot but also some of its more titillating aspects. In an ad placed in the *Afro-American*, the Carey Theatre informed would-be patrons that they will:

SEE the auction of beautiful girls to the lords of Algerian harems
SEE Sheik Ahmed raid her caravan and carry her off to his tent
SEE the fierce battle of Ahmed's clans to rescue the girl from his foes
...
SEE matchless scenes of gorgeous color, and wild free life, and love.⁴¹

The marketing ploy seemingly worked, and the theater was reported to have drawn "capacity houses at every showing."⁴²

While advertisements, such as the one cited above, may have appealed to more normative male Orientalist fantasies, it was, ultimately, the desert romance genre's primary focus upon female sexuality that historically set the genre apart. Rudolph Valentino's status as a 1920s male sex symbol, no doubt, played a large part in securing the popularity of both *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* with black female spectators. "Debonair Rudy," as Valentino was referred to in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, was just as popular with black women throughout the 1920s.⁴³ When the Hollywood star was to be the guest of honor at a large dance in New York City, for instance, Ebie Brooks of Harlem recalled wishing to go so she could "gaze into Sheik Valentino's eyes for once in her life."⁴⁴ The same year, Georgie Washington of Chicago held an "art hop" where the boys dressed as Valentino and the girls wore artists' smock, presumably to paint the surrogate Valentinos.⁴⁵ At honorary screenings following the star's death, it was not uncommon for black theaters to hand out pictures of Valentino to their female patrons.⁴⁶ At a theater in Kansas City, Missouri, these photos were even reported to have caused women to burst into tears.⁴⁷ Likewise,

⁴¹ "The Sheik," Advertisement for Carey Theater, *Baltimore Afro-American* (March 31, 1922), 5.

⁴² "The Sheik," Film Review, *Baltimore Afro-American* (April 7, 1922), 4.

⁴³ "The Son of the Sheik," Film Review, *Baltimore Afro-American* (February 19, 1927), 10.

⁴⁴ "Years to See Sheik; Shoots Husband Dead: Mate's 'No' Brings Death as Wife Pleads to Look into Eyes of Valentino," *Chicago Defender* (March 31, 1923), 2.

⁴⁵ "A Bohemian Party," *Chicago Defender* (September 8, 1923), 4.

⁴⁶ "Renaissance Offers Another Unusual Late Release," *New York Amsterdam News* (September 22, 1926), 12.

⁴⁷ Chas O'Neal, In Old Kaysee, *Chicago Defender* (October 9, 1926), 7.

the *Pittsburgh Courier* recalled the “definitive style of love-making” deployed by the “tense, ardent, panther-like [*sic.*], he-man wooers” that Valentino played onscreen.⁴⁸

Valentino’s popularity among black and white women in the 1920s led some producers within the burgeoning black entertainment industry to bill their own male talents as “Colored Valentinos.” This strategy, utilized by black filmmakers and musicians, was deployed not only to appeal to members of their own race but was also an attempt to market their productions to white consumers as well. When Chicago-based film director Oscar Micheaux released *Wages of Sin* (1929), for instance, he billed leading actor Lorenzo Tucker as the “Colored Valentino.”

According to Tucker’s biographer, the idea came to Micheaux while meeting with a white theater manager to promote the film. At the time, this theater was screening *Son of the Sheik*, which gave Micheaux the idea. While this strategy was, in part, implemented to promote Tucker to white audiences, it would largely fail despite the actor’s light complexion. “I kind of looked like Valentino,” recalled Tucker. “But I never got any white press at all, and very few people outside the black community ever heard of me.”⁴⁹

Tucker was by no means the first black entertainer to be described as a colored Valentino. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, for example, referred to Vernon Hutchins, a singer with the Bobby Lee Cotton Pickers Band, as “the colored Rudolph Valentino” in 1924.⁵⁰ Moreover, unlike Tucker, others proved successful at reaching a multiracial audience. Musician William Green Johnson of the Roscoe Montella Variety Show was one such individual. In its coverage of the variety show’s performance in Hot Springs, Arkansas, the *Chicago Defender* labeled Johnson

⁴⁸ “The Sheik is Dead: Women and Children Trampled as 50,000 Riot to See Body of Valentino,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (September 4, 1926), 8.

⁴⁹ Richard Grupenhoff, *The Black Valentino: The Stage and Screen Career of Lorenzo Tucker* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1988), 65-66 and Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, 127.

⁵⁰ “Vernon Hutchins is off to Philly,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (February 1, 1924), 4.

as a “Colored Rudolph Valentino.” Described as a “scream” and a “riot,” the show was said to have done well that week and drew “favorable comment from the natives, both white and Colored.” Of particular note during Johnson’s performances were the female audience members gathered at the front. They were, according to the *Defender*, “loud in their acclaim for his appearance at all times.”⁵¹

While some black entertainers like Tucker bore a mild resemblance to Rudolph Valentino, others were billed as colored Valentinos simply because of their sexual desirability. That Valentino became a surrogate descriptor for black male beauty standards demonstrates the breadth of his appeal as a sex symbol in 1920s American culture. Naturally, it was in this historical context that the word *sheik* itself began to take on additional meaning outside its original associations with nineteenth and early twentieth century Orientalist discourses. As discussed earlier, because of its close association with Valentino’s films, the word became Jazz Age slang that described a man who was well-dressed, good-looking, suave, cool, and sexually appealing; all qualities that Valentino exuded. In short, a sheik was the male equivalent to the youthful female flapper. Because it was often pronounced as *chic* in vernacular American English, the word could also be used as an adjective to describe man who exhibited any number of stylish or sophisticated qualities. Moreover, *sheiking* was often used as a verb to describe both the active pursuit of a female sex partner or the act of cheating on one’s significant other.

Valentino’s role as inspiration for this linguistic trend was not lost on the *Pittsburgh Courier*. In its coverage of Valentino’s death and New York visitation, the *Courier* noted how the actor “gave the word sheik a new definition and even set the styles in men’s dress.”⁵² In a separate article, columnist Eve Lynn noted, “My sheik rung out from every little flapper’s rose

⁵¹ Vendome Theater, *Chicago Defender* (September 6, 1924), 6.

⁵² “The Sheik is Dead,” 8.

bud mouth, and Rudolph Valentino ... was molded into an American idol - a 'shiek.' And the character of shiek became famous in a day."⁵³

Not surprisingly, then, the label "sheik" was utilized alongside "colored Valentino" to promote the careers of black celebrities throughout the 1920s. When New York-based actor Rudolph Hind, for instance, was cast alongside Tucker in Micheaux's *Wages of Sin*, the *Chicago Defender* billed him as "Harlem's Sheik." A short biographical exposé described Hind as a "tall good looking young man" and featured a photograph of the actor sporting the popular sheik haircut described by Hurston in "Characteristics of Negro Expression." Lest any young flappers get too carried away in their fantasies, the *Defender* went on to note that "their Valentino remains devoted to a beautiful wife and child back home in New York."⁵⁴

The connections between Valentino, sexuality, and black male celebrities was also not lost on white journalist O. O. McIntyre, whose widely-read daily column, *New York Day by Day*, was reprinted in newspapers across the U.S., including the *Baltimore Afro-American*. In his June 8, 1929 installment, McIntyre described a "locally celebrated Harlem sheik." The man was an unnamed "piano player in a cabaret who bears a slight resemblance to the late and lamented Valentino." McIntyre gave a lengthy description of the man that encapsulated the generic image, style, and attitude of a Jazz Age sheik:

He is saddle colored with oily jet hair brushed sleekly back, and a vagabond flair of life. He has his own brilliantly red car and a 'studio' on Edgecombe avenue, and his wardrobe is the real boom-boom of the Lenox avenue promenade.⁵⁵

⁵³ Lynn, *Eve Lynn Chats 'Bout Society and Folks*, 11.

⁵⁴ "Harlem's Sheik: Rudolph Hind," *Chicago Defender* (June 8, 1929), 6.

⁵⁵ O. O. McIntyre, "Harlem Dictys," *New York Day by Day*, *Washington Herald*, reprinted in *Baltimore Afro-American* (June 8, 1929), 6.

Other black musicians, too, adopted this title. Johnny Stephens of the Gibson Chocolate Box Revue, for instance, was known as the “Strutting Sheik.”⁵⁶ Similarly, violinist, Ed Lee Coleman, was billed as the “Fiddling Sheik.” In May 1925, music columnist Bob Hayes noted that Coleman “put on everything from classics to blues with big results” when he performed at Chicago’s Monogram Theatre.⁵⁷ Leo Peachy, a black minstrel drummer with the J. Doug Morgan Stock Company, referred to himself as “the sheik drummer with the tempting ways.”⁵⁸ Carl Moody, a clarinet and sax player from Kansas City, was the “K.C. Sheik.”⁵⁹ The *Chicago Defender* ran advertisements for blues bands like the “Beale Street Sheiks” and “Mississippi Sheiks.”⁶⁰ Even the *Defender’s* California-based dance and music correspondent, “Ragtime” Billy Tucker, could not help but get in on the trend, signing off as “The Sheik of Syncopation” on several of his articles.⁶¹ Others working within his circle simply began to refer to Tucker as “the Sheik.”⁶²

Actors, musicians, and dancers however, were not the only male celebrities to be billed as black sheiks or colored Valentinos in the 1920s. Athletes who excelled in the realm of competitive sports, too, bore this mantle. This trend coincided with increasing national interest in competitive sports. While boxing always had a devoted working-class following since the turn of the century, 1920s saw an exponential increase in the popularity of more and different sports as

⁵⁶ Chase O’Neal, In Old Kaysee, *Chicago Defender* (April 17, 1926), 7.

⁵⁷ Bob Hayes, The Monogram, *Chicago Defender* (May 9, 1925), 6.

⁵⁸ Leo Peachy, Letter to Editor, *Chicago Defender* (January 10, 1925), 8.

⁵⁹ Hits and Bits, *Chicago Defender* (January 9, 1926), 7.

⁶⁰ Paramount Race Record Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (May 25, 1929), 7; Paramount Race Record Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (July 6, 1929); and OKeh Race Record Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (August 9, 1930), 2.

⁶¹ “Ragtime” Billy Tucker, Coast Dope, *Chicago Defender* (October 28, 1922), 6; “Ragtime” Billy Tucker, Coast Dope, *Chicago Defender* (January 20, 1923), 8; and “Ragtime” Billy Tucker, Coast Dope, *Chicago Defender* (May 26, 1923), 6.

⁶² “Kind Billy,” *Chicago Defender* (March 3, 1923), 6; Alexander Fulton, Letter to Editor, *Chicago Defender* (September 8, 1923), 7; Thomas Swifty Harris, The Georgias, *Chicago Defender* (April 12, 1924), 7; and Alexander Fulton, Western Notes, *Chicago Defender* (June 14, 1924), 6.

well as a greater middle class interest. A number of factors effected this change. Improvements in mass communications, for instance, meant that more Americans had access to nationally distributed coverage of sporting events via newsprint and radio. The shorter work days and higher wages that many were becoming accustomed to, also meant that some Americans had more time and more money to spend on leisure activities and entertainment. Higher college enrollment in the 1920s, too, led to a new-found interest in college athletics, especially football. Moreover, many states began to lift local bans that outlawed heavyweight prize fighting, a sign that even boxing was becoming more widely accepted outside its traditional working class sphere.⁶³

Within the black press, “sheik” was used frequently to describe black male athletes, including college football players and boxers. The *Chicago Defender*, for instance, described Lawrence Thomas, the quarterback and team captain of the Jarvis Christian College football team in Eureka, Illinois, as a “sheik” and “campus Valentino.”⁶⁴ Elsewhere, the backfield star of Atlanta University’s football team was labeled the “sheik of campus.” An accompanying full-length publicity photo in the *Defender* shows the unnamed college athlete on the field in uniform and poised for action, his hair greased and slicked to the side in the sheik style haircut of Rudolph Valentino.⁶⁵

Descriptions of black athletes as sheiks went beyond college football too. For instance, as the 3,422-mile trans-American race known as the “Bunion Derby” made its way through Chicago in May 1928, the *Defender* ran an article about 28-year-old runner Eddie Gardner. A former Tuskegee Institute athlete, Gardner was highly praised as a “brilliant cross-country

⁶³ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 33 and 143-161.

⁶⁴ “Coach Mosley Starts to Whip Jarvis into Shape,” *Chicago Defender* (September 15, 1928), 8.

⁶⁵ “Atlanta Backfield Star,” *Chicago Defender* (December 22, 1928), 11.

runner” and a strong contender for the derby’s cash prize. He was also, according to the *Defender*, “referred to as a sheik,” presumably by spectators of the race or former college associates.⁶⁶ Boxers, too, were billed as sheiks in the 1920s. Amateur Chicago boxer, “Battling Rooney,” was described as the “sheik of Blue Island Ave” in an account of his victory over Harry Kaplan.⁶⁷ Similarly, in its coverage of his victory over Johnie Carter, the *Defender* referred to Tiger Taylor, a lightweight boxer from Macon, Georgia, as the “sheik of the ring.”⁶⁸

These descriptions of athletic sheiks and campus Valentinos, no doubt, carried with them the general sexual connotations associated with the Jazz Age lingo of the time, even if such meanings were never explicitly stated in the sports coverage of the race press. However, the billing of black athletes as sheiks might also have signified an investment in Valentino as a medium through which black men could assert strength. For both black and white men, the use of competitive sports to assert racialized masculinity and race pride had become a common practice in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. This was especially true of boxing, as evidenced by the publicity and racial tension surrounding the 1910 prizefight between black boxer, Jack Johnson, and Jim Jeffries, who was white.⁶⁹

The connections between Valentino, athletics, masculinity, and race pride has a sort of historical logic to it. In the summer of 1926, Valentino himself attempted to use an exhibition boxing match to assert his masculinity and pride in response to a particularly salacious article printed in the *Chicago Tribune*. The anonymous editorial, published on July 18, was titled “Pink Powder Puffs” and was one of many articles that that portrayed Valentino as a threat to Anglo

⁶⁶ “Bunion Derby Runners in Illinois,” *Chicago Defender* (May 5, 1928), 11. For more on the Bunion Derby, see: Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 149.

⁶⁷ Plicque’s Amateur Ring Dope, *Chicago Defender* (February 23, 1929), 8.

⁶⁸ “Tiger Taylor Knocks out Johnie Carter,” *Chicago Defender* (December 15, 1928), 8.

⁶⁹ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 2.

American masculinity and racial purity. The article was written in response to the author's discovery of a cosmetics machine in the male bathroom of a ballroom located on Chicago's north side. This "contraption of glass tubes and levers" was reported to have dispensed a pink powdery substance, hence the editorial's titled. The author was doubly alarmed after he witnessed two men utilizing the machine, leading the author to explicitly blame Valentino for such cultural fads as "masculine cosmetics [and] sheiks," all of which were, according to the author, feminizing American men and threatening the nation with "matriarchy."⁷⁰

The "Pink Powder Puff" article was but one of many printed attacks upon Valentino, many more of which were infused with nativist xenophobia that painted the film star as an ethnic foreigner. When Valentino visited Chicago a year before, for example, another anonymous editorial in the *Tribune* bemoaned his strutting about in a green suit, beaver-collared overcoat, and slave bracelet. Like others in its class, the article calls Valentino's masculinity and sexuality into question. The author feared the droves of men who would now be asking about for fashionable attire "just like Valentino's [spoke with a lisp]." The bracketed addendum indicating the vocal inflection reveals the author's belief that any man who would look to Valentino as a role model must surely be gay. The author recalls Valentino's divorces, suggesting, but never explicitly stating, that perhaps the actor's unrevealed sexual orientation might be to blame. The editorial then emphasized Valentino's foreign origins by calling him a "spaghetti gargl[er]." Interestingly, the author concluded his diatribe by proclaiming, "Thank God for Five Yard McCarty!"⁷¹ The last reference to University of Chicago football star, Austin "Five Yards" McCarty, again highlights the ways in which athletics were utilized to assert racialized notions of masculinity. No wonder, then, that this was exactly how Valentino chose to

⁷⁰ "Pink Powder Puffs," *Chicago Tribune* (July 18, 1926), 10A.

⁷¹ "Thank God for Five Yard McCarty," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (November 10, 1925), 8.

defend his honor and image when he decided to make a stand against the “Pink Powder Puff” editorial by challenging its author to a public boxing match.⁷²

How aware African Americans were of the Pink Powder Puff incident as it came to be referred to is unclear. No articles seem to have been published about it in the black papers I researched from the period. However, that alone is not enough to preclude that no knowledge of the event existed within black social circles. Regardless, as has already been demonstrated, Valentino did symbolize for many black Americans virile masculinity. “He is a veritable master of men - and women,” stated one review of Valentino’s *The Sheik* in the *Chicago Defender*. “None can stand against his power which in his empire of sand is almost invincible.”⁷³

The symbolic investment in Valentino, too, went beyond the elite circles of black athletes, musicians, and screen actors. The prevalence of advice columns and advertisements within the black press throughout the 1920s suggests a lucrative market for ordinary men hungry for information and material goods that could help them be more *sheik*. This body of texts modeled new fashions, products, and behaviors. Many readers were looking primarily for advice on women, sex, and love, such as one young man who wrote to “Princess Mysteria,” an advice columnist with the *Chicago Defender*. “What must a young man do who is very attractive and has no end of admirers among women, but who has no desire to be interested in any one female,” he asked? The anonymous author then signed off as “Sheik.”⁷⁴

Male readers of the *Defender* were not the only men to ask questions like this either. Throughout the decade, similar responses popped up in the advice columns of the *New York*

⁷² Anderson, *Twilight of the Idols*, 91-94; Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 256-264; and Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 195-196.

⁷³ “Agnes Ayers, Star, Is Featured in ‘The Sheik,’” 5.

⁷⁴ Anonymous Letter, Princess Mysteria’s Advice to the Wise and Otherwise, *Chicago Defender* (May 26, 1923), 5.

Amsterdam News as well as the *Baltimore Afro-American*. As “Egypsy Ann” of the *Amsterdam News* implored, “All you who wonder why you’re not a sheik among the girls, listen.”⁷⁵ In part, being a sheik among women, according to the advice columnists, meant adopting the right attitude. A sheik, for instance, should never pay his sweetheart too much affection. “If your object of affection is accustomed to much praise from people,” argued Egypsy Ann, “you’d make a far greater impression if you didn’t pay her much attention.”⁷⁶ Likewise, Thodore R. V. Norris, writing for the *Afro-American*, warned against telling a woman she was the prettiest girl in the world” as doing so would lead her “to get stuck on herself and hunt a better looking Sheik.” Norris also advised the male sheik to blame his woman for his own mistakes. If a couple were dancing, for instance, and the male stepped on his partner’s feet, he should tell her to “keep those steamboats in dry-dock.” Doing so would cause her to think that the incident was her fault and give her an overinflated sense of the sheik’s dancing skills. For Norris, it was not enough for the sheik to assert his dominance over his sweetheart, however. He should also establish superiority with her parents as well: “After saying ‘good-night,’ slam the door with all your might, this not only shows cave man stuff, but also awakens her parents, proving their future son-in-law to be a man of action and few words, and not to be trifled with!”⁷⁷

But attitude was only half the ingredient in making a man into a Jazz Age sheik. Right appearances and style were just as important. As such, a swath of male cosmetics, attire, and products were marketed towards black men, all promising to make them over into better and sexier sheiks. A Chicago-based company, for instance, manufactured a hair-straightening and dressing cream named “Sheiko.” An advertisement placed in the *Chicago Defender* featured the

⁷⁵ Egypsy Ann, “Are You a Bore?” *New York Amsterdam News* (October 19, 1928), 9.

⁷⁶ Ann, “Are You a Bore?” 9.

⁷⁷ Thodore R. V. Norris, “Advice to the Sheik,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (August 22, 1925), A16.

profile of a racially ambiguous man with dark glossy hair, parted to the side in the style of Valentino. The advertisement told consumers that this product would make them “look real hot.”⁷⁸ Likewise, a number of manufacturing companies, like Bettman-Dunlap of Cincinnati as well as Capitol Shoes and C. P. N. Merchandise of New York, began producing their own lines of “sheik” shoes.⁷⁹ These leather dual purpose loafers were intended to be worn in a variety of contexts by the “the snappiest dressers” as one C. P. N advertisement put it. “You feel equally at home in them at the dance or on the street.”⁸⁰ Another C. P. N. advertisement echoed a similar message in rhyme: “Wear ’em at the dance. Wear ’em in the street. No matter when you where ’em, they beautify your feet.”⁸¹ Another ad, for the Dunlap Dual Purpose Sheik, even featured the image of a well-dressed young couple that were dancing.⁸²

Perhaps the most interesting accessory marketed towards black men in the 1920s, however, was the “sheik ring,” a piece of jewelry that was used to promote, as one advertisement stated, “good luck in love, games, and business.”⁸³ Advertised as a talisman with mystical Eastern powers, the sheik ring was one of the few accoutrements of the modern Jazz Age sheik that retained the Orientalist aesthetic that had originally inspired the fad. The rings were, according to the advertisements, gold in color and set with rubies and emeralds from Arabia. One ring, reportedly, used “Ancient Arabian Science” to predict the future.⁸⁴ The bezel of these rings contained an engraved relief of an Arab sheik, many of which looked remarkably similar to Valentino. An advertisement in the *Chicago Defender* even referred to Valentino and *The Sheik*

⁷⁸ Sheiko Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (November 8, 1924), 3.

⁷⁹ Capitol Sheik Shoes Advertisement,” *Chicago Defender* (October 18, 1924), A7.

⁸⁰ C. P. N. Merchandise Co. Sheik Shoes Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (December 26, 1925), 8.

⁸¹ C. P. N. Merchandise Co. Sheik Shoes Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (May 16, 1925), 9.

⁸² Dunlap Dual Purpose Sheik Shoe Advertisement, *Chicago Defender*(August 30, 1924), A3.

⁸³ Sheik Ring Advertisement, *Baltimore Afro-American* (September 24, 1927), 17.

⁸⁴ Sheik Ring Advertisement, 17.

to help sell the product: “Rodolph Valentino personifies Good Luck in Love in The Sheik. The Sheik conquers love. The Sheik ring symbolizes this great charm and power.”⁸⁵

Baltimore Afro-American advice columnist L. C. Lindsey offered one final accessory for the aspiring sheik: an automobile. While the manufacturing of cars only began in the 1890s, by the 1920s this new form of transportation was quickly becoming a staple luxury commodity enjoyed by millions of Americans. Technological improvements in mass manufacturing and the expansion of credit allowed many Americans to purchase cheaper and more reliable automobiles in the 1920s. Moreover, the car facilitated greater freedom from traditional courting rituals, allowing young couples to escape the oversight of parental chaperons and explore romance and sexuality with greater ease than previous generations.⁸⁶ No surprise, then, that Lindsey suggested the car as the ultimate tool of sexual liberation for black men. The “Gas buggy sheik” was, according to Lindsey, positioned to meet more girls and faster. “All he has to do is put a few gallons of gas, and go a few miles, and he has more women than his car can carry.” Moreover, if a sheik already had a girlfriend he liked, warned Lindsey, then he better get a car. Otherwise, “some other fellow who has a car will take the opportunity, and if that happens, it’s good-bye girl friend.”⁸⁷

Crime and Morality: The Black Conservative Backlash against Valentino and the Jazz Age Sheik

But not all African Americans were on board with the flashy and libertine sheik style and attitude that Valentino inspired throughout the 1920s. To be sure, some of this resistance was

⁸⁵ Sheik Ring Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (October 6, 1923), 18.

⁸⁶ Drowne and Huber, *The 1920s*, 244 and 249.

⁸⁷ L. C. Lindsey, “The Girls Fall for Gas Buggy Sheiks Says This Reader,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (May 12, 1928), 6.

bred by generational divides and class-based differences of taste that could be found within black social circles. Such prejudices were directed as much towards the black men who wanted to be more like Valentino as they were towards the black women who adored him. On the other hand, African Americans had legitimate concerns about the behaviors of some black men within their own communities. Sexual harassment and sexually related crimes were rampantly covered in the black papers and often in association with the new style and culture of the male sheik. That is not to say that all black men who strove to be like Valentino were criminals, but rather that within the black press, certain types of criminals and public nuisances came to be associated with the male sheik. Black critiques of female desire *for* and male emulation *of* Valentino, then, was rooted in a variety of historical factors that includes: legitimate fears concerning criminality as well as a conservative hesitancy to embrace modernity, consumer capitalism, and mass culture.

In March 1927, Maybelle Robinson Chew, of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, provided one of the more nuanced criticisms of the youthful sheik. Chew began her analytical condemnation by first noting that many of the sheik and flapper's most vocal opponents came from either older generations and/or the clergy. Not being from either class, Chew admitted to having a modicum of sympathy for the rebellious youth and proceeded to give her own interpretation for their actions. Overall, her argument was one against modernity. Sheiks and flappers, noted Chew, were the product of a modern world that offers fleeting amusements but sustains a deeply ingrained boredom and nihilism. "Have you ever known what it is to be utterly bored? Have you ever felt that there was nothing worth while," asked Chew?" That is what ails our young people." According to Chew, these youngsters "have never been taught to rely upon themselves for amusement." As such, they "gorge" themselves on the cheap thrills that society tells them they should like. Rather than develop a unique and personal sense of identity, they become "like

empty vessels or blank pages ... [taking] on whatever their environment offers.” As a remedy, Chew suggested giving children a place to play and “experience youth so that they mature into adulthood instead of prolonged adolescence.”⁸⁸

For Chew, then, modern youth culture was rooted in a society that had nothing of substance to offer. African Americans turned to Valentino as an idol because there was no other viable option. Others, however, did not see it this way, noting that there were plenty of role models out there but that African Americans were, alarmingly, unaware of them at best or at worst not interested. When longtime Harvard University President, Charles William Eliot, died within twenty-four hours of Valentino, for instance, the black presses ran a series of articles juxtaposing the lives and careers of the two men. While Eliot, for the authors of these editorials, represented tradition, public service, and education. Valentino, on the other hand, came to signify all that was modern, flashy, selfish, and superficial. Moreover, the mass dissemination of film was creating a national culture in which someone like Valentino was instantly recognizable, whereas very few knew of Eliot. Should it be any wonder, went the argument, why the youth of America were so morally and socially depraved?

Writing in both the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *New York Amsterdam News*, Kelly Miller began his critique by stating that Eliot and Valentino “represent[ed] two contrasted tendencies in contemporaneous life.” Harvard’s longstanding president, for instance, “represent[ed] America at her best.” He “embodied the tradition, the conscience and the culture of Harvard,” an institution whose “roots strike deep into the soil of Puritanism, of whose seed American civilization, as we see it today, is the fruit.” Miller continued: “Eliot devoted his active life spanning two generations to strenuous service consecrated to the welfare of his kind.”

⁸⁸ Maybelle Robinson Chew, “Maybelle Chew Writes of Young Folks with Nothing to Do: Pity Poor Flappers and Sheiks Says Maybelle Chew,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (March 6, 1927), 12 and 19.

Valentino, on the other hand, “did nothing but pose.” More broadly, Hollywood represented “America gone mad over the gayeties and frivolities of life presented in pictorial form.” According to Miller, success, as it was embodied in Valentino and Hollywood was “leading our youth down the steep path of destruction.” But fear not, argues Miller, who concluded his diatribe with this prediction: “In the years to come the world will look upon [Valentino’s] performances, but will fail to discover a single contribution of noble or lasting value.”⁸⁹

Daniel Lyman Ridout published a similar article in the *Philadelphia Tribune*.⁹⁰ Unlike Miller, Ridout acknowledged Valentino’s “supreme artistry” as well as “the worth of his contributions to American art-life.” However, this was really as far as the two articles diverged as Ridout soon enough began his critique of Valentino by way of comparison to Eliot. The Harvard University President, for instance, “gave his life to the development of American Institutions” for nearly a half-century. Moreover, Eliot:

was always a fearless champion of right, justice and equality of opportunity for all races and peoples, an inspirer [*sic.*] of the youth of the land, a teacher and an exemplar of nobility of character, often called in foreign lands “America’s first citizen.”

Valentino, on the other hand, had spent his fleeting career in the U.S. pursuing “what could hardly be called other than personal glory.” Ridout also brought up the actor’s multiple divorces to further stain his character. In short, Valentino might have been a great actor, but “he did little or nothing for the upbuilding [*sic.*] of those American Institutions that make character for young men and young women.” Ridout lamented that very few Americans knew who Eliot was, while

⁸⁹ Kelly Miller, “Harvard and Hollywood,” *New York Amsterdam News* (September 8, 1926), 15 and Kelly Miller Says, *Baltimore Afro-American* (September 11, 1926), 13.

⁹⁰ Selection from this article were also reprinted in a letter he wrote to the editor of the *Baltimore Afro-American*. See: Daniel Lyman Ridout, Letter to the Editor, *Baltimore Afro American* (September 4, 1926), 13.

nearly all “could have told us that Valentino was the ‘Sheik,’ the ‘Perfect Lover,’ the ‘Handsome Man of the Movies,’ the idol supreme of the silver screen.”⁹¹

Even the *Chicago Broad Axe*, which altogether ignored the Valentino craze throughout the 1920s, weighed in on the comparisons between Eliot and the film star:

Had ex-President Eliot died four decades back, his, and not Valentino’s name, would have adorned the headlines of the American daily press. Today, though, cries of ‘The Sheik is dead’ outsang the lamentations for the creator of the Harvard classics. Today what does it matter if a man who has devoted his lifetime to the education of American youth is borne to the grave, as compared with another who has merely devoted a few hours to the delectation of seekers of rabid screen narration . . . The one built foundations, while the other created fantasies of doubtful art and fables. The one made men of children, while the other made children of men.⁹²

For the *Broad Axe*, the obsession over Valentino’s funeral represented a crippling of the American intellect, one more example of the masses’ desire for “rabid screen narration” over more substantive pursuits such as the Harvard classics as mentioned in the article. The *Broad Axe*, however, was not just concerned about America cultural and intellectual pursuits, but also about the negative impact that such an investment in the fleeting pleasures of mass entertainment might have upon improving race relations in the U.S. “Forty years ago,” lamented the *Broad Axe*, “naught but the demise of General Grant or a Lincoln would have bestirred worshiping throngs such as besieged Valentino’s bier.” The choice of Grant and Lincoln, U.S. presidents associated with both emancipation and early Reconstruction, placed Eliot among a pantheon of fallen heroes worthy of veneration for their efforts to foster better race relations in the U.S. “What had Valentino done for the race” seemed to be the implied and accusatory question of the *Broad Axe*’s argument. “Thus, we see what the black man of America is constantly facing,”

⁹¹ Daniel Lyman Ridout, “Comparison of Valentino and Charles Eliot,” *Philadelphia Tribune* (September 4, 1926), 9.

⁹² The Cameraman, “Exit: Two American Idols,” *Chicago Broad Axe* (September 4, 1926), 3.

concluded the article, “–psychology of the crowd, not the staid judgement of the real thinking men and women of America.” So long as the masses were distracted by superficial cultural icons like Valentino, the argument went, then what hope was there for any sustained and intelligent push for racial equality in 1920s America?⁹³

Concerns over the worship of Valentino were also extended to black engagements with the sheik and flapper youth culture of the 1920s. For instance, while on a speaking tour of the American West, the prominent black intellectual, mathematician, and Dean of Howard University, Kelly Miller, urged black men and women to stop “aping white flappers and sheiks and trying to outdo them.” According to Kelly, black men should “try to develop those traits of character that form better manhood and higher citizenship.” “Instead of imitating the vices of the white man, let us develop our spiritual natures and win a place in life by sheer force of the good we can accomplish.” Whereas Zora Neale Hurston may have read the adoption of the sheik haircut as a form of empowering adaptation, Miller understood the mimicry of white culture – or at least certain aspects of it – as a form of subservience, and more fodder for the cannon of white supremacy. Miller argued that black families should seek life on the farm. There black men would be producers of their own livelihoods and no longer dependent on white employers and susceptible to white popular culture.⁹⁴

On the one hand, then, Valentino’s black detractors opposed the cultural obsession with the silent film star, in part, because he represented to them the antitheses of respectability, high culture, intelligence, and public service. But this was not the only reason some African American critics were so opposed to the silent film star. For many, the problem with Valentino was the

⁹³ “Exit: Two American Idols,” 3.

⁹⁴ “Hollywood is Model Not Holy Land: Kelly Miller in West Advises Youth to Quit Aping White Flappers,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (July 23, 1927), A3 and “Negro Should Be a Producer Says Educator,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (July 30, 1927), A1.

wave of crime and immorality that seemed to follow in his wake. Throughout the 1920s, the race press was full of morally-infused accounts of violence, infidelity, crime, and general disrespect that was ostensibly caused by the sheik attitude that Valentino's star image inspired.

While the bulk of these accounts largely concerned themselves with the black male sheik, several devoted space to Valentino's supposed influence upon female criminality. In March 1923, for instance, the *Chicago Defender* reported that New York-resident Ebie Brooks had confessed to shooting her husband dead during a scuffle that had resulted in her husband forbidding Ebie from attending a large dance at which Valentino was to be the guest of honor. The incident began when Ebie's husband, George, asked his wife where she was going for the night. Ebie informed him that she was going to the dance to "gaze into Sheik Valentino's eyes for once in her life." Tensions escalated quickly when George, despite Ebie's continued pleas, denied her permission to attend. According to family members who were in a separate room of the apartment, an argument ensued until finally a "scuffle was heard. A shot rang out: then came a shrill scream." The family rushed into the room. The *Defender* described the crime scene as such:

[A] woman's form was seen bending over that of her dying husband, who lay on his back across the bed. A warm stream of blood trickled from the wound above his heart. "George! George!" called the terror-stricken woman with his head clasped closely to her breast. But there was no answer. "Oh, my God!" she exclaimed, "I've killed him. Why have I done this? What- what shall I do?"

From there, Ebie, reportedly, fled by foot and taxi to her brother's home. Soon after, the police caught up with her and she was arrested. In custody, she confessed to the killing of her husband, but claimed it was in self-defense after he had initially gone for the gun.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ "Yeans to See Sheik; Shoots Husband Dead," 2.

One can imagine the power that such a narrative held for many reform-minded African Americans. Not only did it seem as if Valentino was a catalyst for black criminality but the chaos that followed in his wake threatened to violently dismantle the normative black family. Within the black press, however, it was mostly the actions of black men in relation to Valentino's influence that was of greatest concern. Just like the word *sheik* was utilized to promote and celebrate the careers of black entertainers, so too did it become a label which could easily identify and characterize black male criminality and immorality in the 1920s.

The *Baltimore Afro-American*, for instance, described the male sheik as a "variety of useless humanity."⁹⁶ Elsewhere, the paper bemoaned the lack of chivalry, romance, courtesy, and refinement embodied in this new model of masculinity:

The modern boy friend, unlike his antiquated, chivalrous brother, no longer seeks the companionship of the opposite sex, but he is so vain as to think that the opposite sex should seek his company. His highest ambitions are to shower himself with glory and fame.

Moreover, the black sheik had done away with respectable behavior at dances, where he was more than likely to encounter females. Rather than "ceremoniously bow" while politely requesting a dance, he now "lean[s] against the wall until a prospective victim passes, then he commands in his most collegiate air 'come on, sister, let's shake a foot.'"⁹⁷

It was this modern sheik attitude that prompted Helene Lassiter to write a letter to the editor of the *Philadelphia Tribune* bemoaning the absence of any available men worthy of her attention. "I don't care much for the modern type of man," she complained. "There are too many of the 'sheik' type of men today."⁹⁸ Another complaint about the modern Jazz Age sheik was his

⁹⁶ "A 'Sheik,' Antidote," *Baltimore Afro-American* (March 23, 1923), 13.

⁹⁷ "Chivalry Romance Are Dying: Sheiks and Cowboys of Today Lack Courtesy and Refinement of Young Folk before the War," *Baltimore Afro-American* (September 8, 1928), 18.

⁹⁸ Helene Lassiter, Letter to Editor, *Philadelphia Tribune* (December 13, 1928), 9.

propensity for infidelity. Robert and Melvina Banks of Baltimore, for instance, had been “happily married” for about fifteen years. Moreover, Robert, according to his wife, was “a staunch member of Macedonia Baptist Church.” Yet, despite their weekly church attendance, Robert had become in the last few years “A Real Sheik,” romantically pursuing the company of “various low and abandoned women.”⁹⁹ The fear that one’s man might cheat, or “sheik,” on his spouse or significant other was even sung about in the 1924 blues song “If You Sheik on Your Mama Mean Papa Turn in Your Key.”¹⁰⁰

Neither was the sexual indulgence and excess of the modern sheik confined to the actions of adults. Harold Simms of Columbus, Ohio, for instance, was only fifteen when his harem of 108 shebas was discovered, a find that eventually led the teenage sheik to reform school. Described by the *Chicago Defender* as a “bronze imitator of Rudolf Valentino,” Simms was reported to have shown up to his juvenile court hearing posing as Sheik Ahmed Ben Hassan from *The Sheik*.¹⁰¹ In addition to this calculated appearance, Simms also brought the sheik attitude to court as well. He was “[u]nabashed and unafraid” as he “boldly laid claims to his harem.” At his hearing, it was uncovered that Simms had only been to school for three days of the year due to the time-consuming nature of his “sheikistic experiences.” When the teenager’s diary was entered in as evidence, it revealed all the names of his harem shebas as well as the locations of his various “love nests.” In the diary, Simms expressed his interest in “women, flowers and more women.” The diary also provided a lengthy rationalization for the teenager’s behavior, hinting that a part of him felt guilt over his actions:

⁹⁹ “Wife Says Husband Was Both Churchman, Sheik,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (March 2, 1929), 10.

¹⁰⁰ Rialto Music Shop Advertisement, *Chicago Defender* (April 26, 1924), 8.

¹⁰¹ Simms was not the only black sheik convicted of a morality crime to have appeared as a Valentino look-alike in court. When Robert McAyllis was tried for multiple accounts of bigamy, he was reported to have “appeared in court as a duplicate of Rudolph Valentino, including sideburns and all.” See: “Two Wives Meet in Court against Man,” *Chicago Defender* (June 14, 1924), 3.

“Isn’t it wonderful ... How silly the girls are! Why do they like me so? I am just kind to them. They are nice things, it is true, but just to be played with. Sometimes I wonder if I am doing right, but I must be because I do not make them come to me ... Somehow I sometimes feel as though all this was too good to be true.”

As a result of all this, Simms was sent to a boys’ industrial school in Lancaster “to protect the fascinated beauties of the city from the ardent youngster whose love seemed to run like hot butter in the summer time.” The fifteen-year-old’s behavior was shocking to the court, which the *Defender* described as “astonished.” At the opening of the court case, when the full extent of Simms’ “harem” was being disclosed, the judge was reported to have “lift[ed] his eyes at the mention of the word.”¹⁰²

While the judge may have expressed concerns over the actions of a philandering teenager, other were concerned that this patriarchal harem culture would lead to greater instances of female criminality. A cartoon in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, for instance, featured a woman shooting her sheik after discovering that he was involved with more women than just her. The cartoon’s first scene is located in a hospital where a woman named “Pretty Bernice Simpson” meets Harry Smith. “It was a case of love at first sight for both of them,” notes the caption. The next frame shows Bernice and Harry kissing on a park bench. The caption reads: “Valentino had nothing on Smith when it came to love making.” Next, we see Smith on the same park bench, this time with two different women clutched around his arms. Bernice hides behind a tree bearing witness to her man’s infidelity. In the final frame, Bernice guns down Harry in the alley where he works as a bootblack. She explains, “He’s my sweet man. I couldn’t let him break other girls’ hearts as he did mine.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² “Young Sheik Has 108 Shebas: 15 Year Old Boy Boasts of a Harem,” *Chicago Defender* (April 14, 1923), 1.

¹⁰³ “Valentino Has Nothing on Her ‘Sheik’ Says This Flapper,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (April 30, 1927), 13.

Whether or not this cartoon was based upon a real-life incident was not made clear in the *Afro-American*. However, at least in one instance, jealousy gave way to violence between two female members of one sheik's harem in Little Rock, Arkansas. On October 10, 1924, Gladys Storms assaulted Geraldine Gerard with a barber's straight razor. The fight, according to the *Chicago Defender*, was over the "matter of who should have possession of an East side 'Sheik' body and soul, love and all." While the news coverage was not explicit on the issue, Gerard must have been left in critical condition. As the *Defender* noted, "Storms faced a charge of assault to murder" while in lockup.¹⁰⁴

For some African Americans, the Jazz Age sheik came to symbolize a modern, degenerate social order, rife with crime and immorality, quite literally, making the streets of urban America wild, unsafe, and downright frightening. In the *Afro-American*, Sally "the Flapper Reporter" described Pennsylvania Avenue, home to Baltimore's black and Jewish business and entertainment district, as a landscape rife with stylish, boisterous, and dangerous sheiks. The street was, according to Sally, packed with "sheiks of all varieties ... incased [*sic.*] in so many varieties of styles." Some were with girlfriends, but it was the ones that hung out in all-male "gangs" that were loud, "making more noise than an airplane." At one point of the night, Sally heard a "wild uncivilized, savage yell." Out of a door ran a man who was "followed in double time by a lady that looked every bit of what the yell sounded like." Sally did not elaborate on why the disheveled and screaming woman was chasing after the man, making the entire scene all the more discombobulating.¹⁰⁵ Elsewhere in the *Afro-American*, Jason N. Jones noted the sheiks of Pennsylvania Avenue, complete with "Valentino side burns [and] smelling of bad bootleg

¹⁰⁴ "Here's an Example of What 'Love' Will Do," *Chicago Defender* (October 11, 1924), 11.

¹⁰⁵ Sally, "Flapper Reporter See Things on Pennsylvania Avenue," *Baltimore Afro-American* (December 13, 1924), 12.

whiskey, traveling in gangs.”¹⁰⁶ In the end, Sally’s takeaway of Baltimore’s black and Jewish business district was not promising: “So much for Pennsylvania Avenue. The more I talk about it the more frightened I get.”¹⁰⁷

In 1924, the *Defender* provided a similar analysis of Chicago’s Washington Park, which it described as a “meeting place for roughnecks.” The reporter, for example, discovered tennis courts being used to host “dance jigs;” loud and boisterous activities at all hours of the day and night; a boathouse where unchaperoned girls go with their sheiks to indulge in petting parties; as well as gangs of youth harassing patrons in a whole variety of manners.¹⁰⁸ Chicago and Baltimore were not the only urban areas where city-dwellers might expect to be harassed by street sheiks. Harry Webster was fined \$50 in 1923 when he declared he was a “sheik from King Tut’s tomb” before “embracing two girls” at the corner of Tremont and Arlington Square in Boston.¹⁰⁹

Some black sheiks, then, indulged in a variety of behaviors that were considered by many to be morally reprehensible and, at times, were actually illegal. These included: dancing (or at least certain types of dancing); premarital sexual experimentation, polygamy, cheating and bigamy; public and private intoxication; as well as general and sexual harassment. Still other sheiks, engaged in premeditated crimes that were far more nefarious than the sometimes-criminal behaviors discussed above. One of the more serious types of culprits was referred to in the black press as a “sporty” or “sporting” sheik. Part pimp, part boyfriend, the sporting sheik, according to the *Baltimore Afro-American*, would prey upon the vulnerabilities of “weak and deluded

¹⁰⁶ Jason N. Jones, “Baltimore’s Streets: Pennsylvania Avenue,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (November 22, 1924), 12.

¹⁰⁷ Sally, “Flapper Reporter Sees Things on Pennsylvania Avenue,” 12.

¹⁰⁸ “Washington Park Becomes Pest-Bound: New a Meeting Place for Roughnecks,” *Chicago Defender* (August 30, 1924), 4.

¹⁰⁹ “Tut’s Sheik Fined,” *Chicago Defender* (April 14, 1923), 1.

women,” cajoling them into nonreciprocal relationships whereby the male was pampered with sex, food, shelter, and a cut of his women’s earnings, which were often, but not always, gained from prostitution. Such was the circumstance that Matilda Chin found herself in with sporting sheik David Scott. In 1923, Chin was charged with manslaughter after stabbing Scott in self-defense on the night of September 1. According to Chin, she was in love with Scott and for four months “had worked for him, provided him a home, furnished him food and extra spending money,” which Chin earned as a laundress. After Scott beat Chin for refusing to prostitute herself for extra money, she set out to leave the sporting sheik once and for all. However, “urged by a love that she could not explain,” Chin returned to Scott who beat her again for leaving. On the night of the killing, Scott threatened to beat Chin again for not bringing in enough money from her job as a laundress. Chin grabbed a pairing knife from the kitchen to defend herself and when Scott came at her with an axe, she stabbed him in the thigh. Chin’s assailant dropped the axe but proceeded to choke her with his hands. “[F]eeling that it was her life or his,” noted the *Afro-American*, Chin stabbed Scott in the heart, killing him. Fortunately for Chin, her story held up in cross-examination and Scott’s history of abuse was corroborated by two neighbors.¹¹⁰

Another infamous sheik criminal was John James Smith, known throughout Harlem as the “Lonely Wife Burglar.” In 1926, Smith was sentenced to a sixty year term for robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, and having an unregistered concealed firearm on his person.¹¹¹ In general, Smith would stake the apartment of a married woman, wait for her husband and roommates to leave, then gain admittance by posing either as a detective or a lingerie and perfume salesman. It was because of the latter disguise that he was also known as the “Perfunic

¹¹⁰ “Guilty of Manslaughter: Woman Tells How She Slew Sporty Sheik,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (November 2, 1923), A1.

¹¹¹ “Sheik Robber Dragged into Harlem Court: Sneak Thief Identified by Women Victims,” *Chicago Defender* (August 28, 1926), 2.

Sheik.”¹¹² In addition to robbing his victims of their clothes and jewelry, coverage of Smith’s trial strongly suggested that he also raped or sexually assaulted the women in some manner. “Once in the flat he would try to strike up a flirtation with the woman whom he was showing the goods,” noted the *Baltimore Afro-American*. “If the woman resisted his advances, he threatened to kill her.”¹¹³ Likewise, the *Chicago Defender* described how Smith’s victims “were compelled to undress and comply with his immoral wishes.”¹¹⁴ What exactly those “immoral wishes” were was not made entirely clear in the trial’s coverage. Smith had somewhere between five and twelve victims and would have had more were it not for Synthria Mina, who, depending on the source, either fended off Smith or scared him away by screaming when he tried to rob her. In either case, Mina suffered a non-fatal gunshot wound to the cheek in her encounter with Smith.¹¹⁵ Thanks in large to Mina’s brave actions and the testimony of his many victims, Smith was apprehended, tried, sentenced to a lengthy prison term. According to the *Defender*, he would “do no more sheiking for at least 51 years.”¹¹⁶ While awaiting trial in probationary lockup, Smith converted to Christianity, earning him the new nickname of “Praying Sheik.”¹¹⁷

So frightening was the sheik criminal that some black women took to carrying pistols in their purses for self-defense. When twenty-four-year-old Patience Davis of Atlantic City, NJ was caught concealing a firearm on her person, for example, she explained that it was “[m]erely a protection from the sheiks.” She also elaborated that she had many friends who also carried pistols for similar reasons.¹¹⁸ Yet, not all sheik criminals engaged in violent crimes against

¹¹² “Judge Gives Harlem Sheik 60-Year Term,” *Chicago Defender* (September 25, 1926), 1.

¹¹³ “Praying Sheik Gets 60 Years,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (September 25, 1926), 3.

¹¹⁴ “Sheik Robber Dragged into Harlem Court,” 2.

¹¹⁵ “Sheik Robber Dragged into Harlem Court,” 2 and “Judge Gives Harlem Sheik 60-Year Term,” 1.

¹¹⁶ “Judge Gives Harlem Sheik 60-Year Term,” 1.

¹¹⁷ “Judge Gives Harlem Sheik 60-Year Term,” 1.

¹¹⁸ “Afraid of Sheiks,” *Baltimore Afro-American* (August 14, 1926), 2.

women. In fact, some turned to crime precisely because it was the only way they could afford to lavish their many girlfriends with material possessions. In September 1923, for instance, John H. Lucas of Washington, D. C. was convicted and jailed for seven charges of larceny. It was discovered that Lucas was, according to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the “‘sheik’ of a regular harem of dusky ‘shebas.’” The stolen goods were largely silk stocking and shoes for his many female companions; just another part of the “high cost of loving” for a modern urban sheik warned the *Courier*.¹¹⁹ Likewise, Richard Evans, the “Sheik Bandit” of Harlem, was notorious for holding up New York taxis. Evans’ diary revealed that he used the stolen money, in part, to publish his own original songs. However, it also showed that much of the money was going towards his many girlfriends. According to the *Chicago Defender*, Evans’ meticulously recorded “his love affairs, the degree of love and pleasure had in each ‘vamp’ and how much cash he lavished on each.”¹²⁰

Conclusion

In July 1923, Frank Crain, a young black man from Eldora, Arkansas, was assaulted by a gang of white youths. According to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Crain had been strolling along Eldora’s Main Street in “a pair of bell-bottomed Rudolph Valentino pants.” Described as “a dapper well set up colored youth,” trouble came for Crain when white residents had heard he was drawing the attention of Eldora’s white women. The gang “seized him, tore the trousers from his legs and the police threw him in jail.” Such were the dangers of a black man dressing like a sheik

¹¹⁹ “High Cost of Loving Lands Sheik in Jail,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (September 29, 1923), 9.

¹²⁰ “Sheik Bandit Robs Taxis to Publish Songs: Spends Victims’ Coin on Love Lyrics,” *Chicago Defender* (May 8, 1926), 2.

in the American South. “They may get by with it in Chicago or New York,” warned the *Courier*, “but Eldora Ark. Has not yet worked up to the ‘Sheik’ level.”¹²¹

Whether or not there was any racially motivated violence directed towards black men emulating Valentino in the North we may never know. Certainly, none had been documented in the black newspapers I looked at in this chapter; though, I suspect that such instances may have occurred. Regardless, the cultural divide between North and South in the *Pittsburgh Courier’s* coverage of the white assault on Frank Crain was indicative of a much larger emotional investment in the North by African Americans who partook in the Great Migration. The North was to be a promised land where jobs were abundant and racism, while still present, was at least not a part of the legal fabric of society as it was in the Jim Crow South. For many African Americans, *The Sheik* and Rudolph Valentino were powerful and positive icons around which they could navigate their new lives in the urban North. From black entertainers to everyday men and women, these symbols of the burgeoning mass entertainment industry allowed African Americans to explore and construct new meanings of blackness all the while supporting their attempts at greater integration into American society. The *Pittsburgh Courier* even found encouragement in the mass reaction to Valentino’s death, noting that “although a Catholic and a foreigner, Protestant America weeps” for the late film star. Perhaps “superficialities such as color, creed, race and nationality” might not always matter, wondered the paper, which hoped that Valentino’s funeral might “hearten any temporarily discouraged Aframerican [*sic.*] struggling to scale the heights.”¹²²

Of course, not all black Americans saw it this way. For some, Valentino and, more broadly, mass entertainment were the very things holding African Americans back. Investment in

¹²¹ “‘Sheik’ Attracted Too Much Attention, Arrested by Police,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (July 28, 1923), 2.

¹²² “An Encouraging Thought,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (September 11, 1926), 16.

Valentino and the Jazz Age sheik were misguided at best and, at worst, outright dangerous. For some, Valentino seemed to be at the root of all contemporary social ills plaguing African Americans in the North. Issues as far-ranging as anti-intellectualism, the degradation of the traditional family, urban crime, and race hatred were all attributed, in part, to desire for and emulation of Valentino.

On August 20, 1930, nearly four years to the day of Valentino's untimely death, the *New York Amsterdam News* ran an article promoting an upcoming re-screening of *Son of the Sheik*. The article had the following to say about the film's leading man: "There are certain stars that will live forever in the hearts of the picture-going public, and such a one is Rudolph Valentino, whose beloved and romantic figured has never been replaced on the screen."¹²³ Nothing could get closer to the truth. Love him or hate him, Valentino and the cultural trends he inspired occupied a central place in the hearts and minds of many African Americans throughout the 1920s.

¹²³ "Valentino Lives Again in Picture at the Douglas," 9.

CONCLUSION

There is a passage from E. M. Hull's *The Sheik* (1919) where the romance novel's female protagonist, Diana Mayo, fantasizes about all the different types of Arab sheiks she might encounter in North Africa. There were the merchant sheiks of Biskra, who catered to the whims and desires of adventurous European travelers. These sheiks "drove hard bargains to hire out mangy camels and sore-covered donkeys for trips into the interior desert." While these merchant sheiks may have been a common part of the day-to-day existence of European travelers lodged in an Algerian city on the edge of the desert, there were, Diana believed, "other and different Sheiks who lived far away across the shimmering sand." These sheiks were "more like the Arabs of her imaginings" than the "faithless caravan-leader[s]" with whom she was accustomed. These sheiks were "powerful chiefs with large followings." "When not engaged in killing their neighbours," Diana imagined them "drowsing away whole days under the influence of narcotics, lethargic with sensual indulgence." Diana visualized "fat old men sitting cross-legged in the entrance of their tents, waited on by hordes of retainers, and looking languidly, with an air of utter boredom, at some miserable slave being beaten to death." Diana eventually encounters this type of sheik when she is captured by the villainous Ibrahim Omair. But then there was Ahmed Ben Hassan, the sheik who had defied Diana's expectations. True, at times he was as barbarous and violent as any of the other Arabs she had met or heard about, but there was something more to him. Somewhere, hidden beneath the flowing white robes of this Bedouin tribesman, was a

man unlike any Diana had met or imagined. Here was the only man capable of stirring in her the “womanly instincts that ... had been suppressed and undeveloped.”¹

This passage from *The Sheik* points towards an underlying historical trend that accompanied American fascinations with the icon of the Arab sheik in the period spanning the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The word *sheik* could conjure a variety of images in the imaginations of those fascinated by his appeal. As Hull explicitly admits in the above-cited passage, “The term sheik itself was elastic.”² It has been the primary objective of this dissertation to uncover that symbolic elasticity of the Arab sheik in American culture, demonstrating the sheer diversity of ideas, meanings, and images that were attached to him. As such, I have explored how the meanings and significance about this cultural icon changed through time and varied depending on the contexts in which they circulated and the historical conditions faced by the producers and consumers of his image. Broadly, I have argued that meanings about the Arab sheik in American culture were not only varied, dynamic, and often contradictory but also that the Arab sheik operated as a powerful symbol around which a diverse cast of American men and women negotiated the cultural, social, political, and economic forces that shaped their lives in the period spanning 1830-1930.

This dissertation locates the roots of American sheikmania not in the pages of British romance novels or their Hollywood adaptations. Though both would have a lasting impact. Nor have I upheld white women as the primary group to produce and consume ideas and images about Arab sheiks. Though, again, this demographic would certainly play a key role in the history of sheikmania as other scholars have already demonstrated. Rather, I locate the historical roots of American sheikmania in the lives, careers, and cultural productions of male Anglo

¹ Edith Maude Hull, *The Sheik* (1919/1921) (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2007), 72 and 142.

² Hull, *The Sheik*, 72.

American authors and artists. If Anglo American men in the 1920s were some of the most vocal opponents of the sheik as depicted by film star Rudolph Valentino, then, when placed in a historical perspective, this largely seems to be the exception and not the rule. Since the mid-nineteenth century, middle and upper class white males in the U.S. often expressed a meaningful and positive interest in the Arab sheik. As demonstrated in my first chapter, these cultural encounters were both material and imaginative. In this period, many middle and upper class white men travelled to North African and West Asia, encountering the environment and its inhabitants first-hand. Some recorded their observations and experiences in paintings, travelogues, and poetry. While their work was often rooted in experiences abroad, it was often as much rooted in fantasy. Many Anglo American males in this period invested in a romanticized image of the Arab sheik and his primary environ: the desert. As urbanization, industrialization, and modernity threatened to erode traditional nineteenth century understandings of masculinity, middle and upper class white men saw in their selective view of the Arab sheik an idol of manliness worth emulating. Rugged and free, the romanticized sheik was thought of as a man still very much in charge of his own destiny in a world that *seemed* increasingly out of one's control. The Arab sheik as depicted by Valentino may have been the embodiment of feminized masculinity, as many Anglo American males argued in the 1920s, but the Arab sheik, in general, evoked rugged masculinity, adventurism, and absolute liberty. These themes emerge in the experiences and work of Bayard Taylor, whose poetry, travelogues, and private correspondences demonstrated such a hybrid model of white masculinity dressed in Arab robes.

By expanding our scope of sheikmania beyond the 1920s and into the nineteenth century, therefore, I have revealed the extent to which white men revered, rather than sneered at, the Arab sheik. Such a conclusion, however, is just as apparent if one focuses upon the spat of

Hollywood-produced desert romances released prior to and after the controversial success of Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* (1921). In chapter two, I go deeper into the cultural history of silent American cinema's relationship to the desert romance genre between the years 1909-1927. In particular, I explore the genre's intricate relationship to the controversial subject of miscegenation between white women and Arab men. As a literary and cinematic genre, the desert romance often struck a fine balance which titillated audiences with taboo narratives of racial miscegenation only to reaffirm the ultimate morality of intraracial romantic couplings. Between 1909-1919, Hollywood filmmakers experimented with a number of strategies for dealing with this common theme of desert romance literature, only to settle upon the classic character type which I have labeled the "white sheik." Like Ahmed Ben Hassan of E. M. Hull's novel, audiences were led to believe this character was an Arab sheik in pursuit of a white woman only to have his true identity revealed at the last moment, making the romantic interest between the two racially safe. As other scholars have demonstrated, many filmgoers found this work-around unbelievable in Rudolph Valentino's *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* (1926), partly the result of the film star's ethnic identity as an Italian immigrant. In a period of rampant anti-immigrant xenophobia, where New Immigrants like Italians and Arabs were legally considered white but culturally marked as other, such a response is not surprising. My analysis of mainstream newspapers and film industry trade journals, however, reveals that, outside of Valentino's two films, not a single desert romance film produced between 1909-1927 drew this type of racialized concern over miscegenation. Overall, I argue, Hollywood had discovered a successful strategy for dealing with miscegenation in desert romance films. The vocal response of many white men against Hull's novels and Valentino's films stemmed not from the plot or the characters of *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik*, but rather from the fact that a woman and an ethnic

immigrant were seemingly intruding upon cultural terrain that in the preceding century, as demonstrated in my first chapter, had largely been the domain of Anglo American men.

But what of non-white cultural producers and consumers? What was their relationship to the figure of the Arab sheik in the period spanning the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth centuries? I begin to answer these questions in this dissertation's third and fourth chapters, demonstrating that not only did the Arab sheik have significance to Arab American and African American cultural consumers but also that both demographics played a key role in defining and re-defining this icon in ways that resonated broadly throughout American culture. Chapter three, for instance, takes a look at Arab Americans' often complicated relationships with American Orientalism. While some, like literary and cultural icon Ameen Rihani, criticized Hollywood's exotic and romanticized depiction of the desert and the Arab sheik, many other Arab immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century on chose to embrace this cultural fascination with Arabs as a means to integrate their lives and careers into their new, often hostile and unaccepting, home. Arab restaurant-owners, for instance, re-named their establishments after *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* as a strategy to drum up business and invite white patrons to try their foods. Arab immigrants, like Sheik Hadji Tahar, also became involved in the evolving and expanding entertainment industries of the period and directly contributed to the explosion of interest in the exotic and romantic Arab sheik. For instance, while Tahar started out as manager of a group of Arab acrobats when he first came to the U.S. in the 1870s, he would, by the 1920s, find himself serving as a technical consultant and providing props, background actors, and theatre displays for several Hollywood desert romance films.

My final chapter, not only explores the cultural relationship that African Americans had to the figure of the Arab sheik but also demonstrates the unique role that many played in the

cultural evolution of the word *sheik* itself in the 1920s. As the 1920s came to signal for many Americans an era of material and sexual abundance, loose social morality, and an ever-increasing investment in consumer goods as an expression of personal identity, the label *sheik* came to denote a certain style of masculinity associated with these cultural and social shifts. As a piece of Jazz Age slang, *sheik* often described a man who was good-looking, stylish, suave, and sexually liberal – qualities which were, often associated with the “sheik of cinema,” himself, Rudolph Valentino. But this Jazz Age sheik was no desert-dwelling Arab. Rather, he was largely the male equivalent to the female flapper. He wore stylish clothing and polished loafers, spending his evenings in pursuit of excitement and pleasure at the hottest urban jazz clubs. Here was a new and exciting model of masculinity. One that seemed to fit with the times for many Jazz Age youth living in the growing metropolitan centers of the northern U.S. Moreover, as an increasing number of African Americans made their way to these cities during the Great Migration, the modern, urban sheik offered a powerful cultural icon through which young black men and women could openly explore their relationships to their own sexualities and racial identities in ways that were eminently more meaningful and in tune with their new, urban environment. Of course, not all African Americans were so enamored with the modern sheik. Just as Valentino and the sheik drew criticism from the social guardians of white middle class propriety, so too, did he take flack from black conservatives. For many, both Valentino and the new style of masculinity he inspired served as scapegoats that explained the rise of urban crime within northern black neighborhoods. Moreover, black debates surrounding the lifestyle of the urban sheik mobilized concerns that many had about the ever-increasing roles that consumer capitalism and mass entertainment seemed to be playing in the daily lives of African Americans.

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