

Troubleshooting Post-9/11 America: Religion, Racism, and Stereotypes in Suzanne Brockmann's *Into the Night* and *Gone Too Far*

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Abstract: American imperialism and the war on terror loom large in today's popular romances. Military romances featuring spec-ops warriors and their terrorist enemies appeal to, reflect on, and sometimes critique patriotic ideals. Sheikh heroes and monstrous Muslim men provide seemingly opposed yet actually interdependent Orientalist fantasies of racialized Arab/Middle Eastern masculinity. Bestselling author Suzanne Brockmann, known for her inclusive characters and plotlines, addresses these themes in her Troubleshooters series (2000-present). *Troubleshooters* centers on Navy SEALs and FBI counterterrorism agents. Brockmann simultaneously deploys and undercuts stereotypes of Muslim men while appealing to pro-American sentiment. An al-Qaeda attack and the hunt for its perpetrator structure the suspense plots of the first two post-9/11 installments, *Into the Night* (2002) and *Gone Too Far* (2003), while interracial romance storylines grapple with anti-Arab bigotry and anti-black racism. Like authors of sheikh novels, Brockmann appeals to knowledge and relationships as a means of overcoming prejudice. Yet rather than white feminism integrating Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern heroes into neoliberal modernity, Brockmann displaces the setting for social reform from a fictionalized Middle East to America, signaling prejudice as a crucial threat to America's safety as well as to individuals' well-being. For Brockmann, stereotypes imperil national security if real threats go unnoticed while racialized Muslims are stigmatized as violent and fanatical. Moreover, she claims, positive as well as negative stereotypes prevent intimacy and love from flourishing. Ultimately, while taking cognizance of larger social norms and discourses and critiquing anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-black racism, Brockmann emphasizes individual inner transformation resulting from intimate human connections across racial-ethnic differences.

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In the years since 2001, the number of “desert,” “sheik,” or “Orientalist” romance novels published has “exponentially increased” (Burge 182).[1] Alongside the greater prominence of soldier-heroes (Kamblé, *Making Meaning*), including those engaged in a fictionalized Middle East/Muslim world, these romances illustrate the central place of America’s so-called War on Terror in popular fantasies and anxieties. Even though readers, authors, and editors alike deny any relationship between the rising popularity of such novels and U.S. involvement in Muslim-majority nations (Jarmakani, “Sheik” 994, *An Imperialist Love Story* ix; Holden 3), popular romance demonstrably reflects current controversies (Kamblé, *Making Meaning*) even if specific geopolitical topics are omitted (Teo 197, 284).

Suzanne Brockmann is among those authors whose work directly addresses United States military and intelligence involvement in the (broadly conceived) Middle East and in the fight against what it considers Islamic terrorism. Brockmann (b. 1960) has published over fifty novels since 1993. Roughly half feature military heroes, mostly Navy SEALs. Brockmann began her career writing stand-alone category romances. Her eleven-book Tall, Dark, and Dangerous series (1996-2003, abbreviated TDD), first published in Silhouette’s Intimate Moments line, centers on the members of SEAL Team Ten. The series has recurring characters but mostly independent plots. Her Troubleshooters series (2000-, abbreviated TS), on which this article focuses, comprises larger single-title romances with intricate suspense plots and deeply interdependent storylines carried out over fifteen full-length novels, a novella, and two anthologies. After a hiatus during which Brockmann worked on other creative projects, another novel came out in July 2017. Troubleshooters follows SEAL Team Sixteen, a group of FBI Counterterrorism agents, and former members of both groups who form a private security firm called Troubleshooters, “the equivalent of a civilian SEAL Team” (TS #6 311). Seven of the books incorporate World War II subplots.

The Troubleshooters books merge “progressive, feminist, and antiracist politics” with “jingoistic patriotism,” according to Hsu-Ming Teo, who writes briefly about Brockmann in her study of Orientalism and romance novels (277). Teo’s claim is borne out by the overlaps and divergences between these agendas in the first two Troubleshooters installments written after 9/11. Published in 2002, *Into the Night* (TS #5) revolves around an al-Qaeda assassination attempt on the president at a San Diego naval base. A Muslim terrorist, whose identity is revealed in the last third of the book, exploits the disintegrating marriage of SEAL Sam Starrett to smuggle weapons onto the base by tricking his estranged wife Mary Lou. It ends with the attack mostly thwarted, a fall guy badly injured, and the real terrorist escaping because racial profiling casts suspicion on the wrong person. In the 2003 novel *Gone Too Far* (TS #6), Mary Lou and her young daughter flee, fearing retribution; Sam and his FBI-agent love interest Alyssa Locke track them down while hunting the terrorist, apprehended in the book’s climax. *Gone Too Far* shifts the focus from anti-Arab bigotry to contemporary anti-black racism, America’s history of white supremacy, and the healing possibilities of interracial relationships. Over the course of these two novels, Mary Lou and Sam, both white, find lasting happiness with non-white partners—in Mary Lou’s case, Ibrahim Rahman, an

Arab immigrant suspected of being a terrorist. This pair of novels focuses intently on stereotypes, race, and what it means to be an American.

This article proceeds in four sections. The first briefly surveys the post-9/11 American climate of ideas about Islam and Muslims. The second shows how *Into the Night* both draws upon and critiques stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. The third compares Ibrahim to sheikh heroes, showing that rather than playing into assumptions about race, religion, and liberal (white) feminist savior projects, Brockmann portrays America as in need of reform. The fourth section concentrates on *Gone Too Far*, shifting the discussion on race, difference, and American identity to anti-black racism and interracial relationships. I conclude that although Brockmann acknowledges the importance of large-scale social change, she concentrates on and values personal transformation achieved via humanizing intimate connection across lines of racial difference.

1. TROUBLESHOOTING THE WAR ON TERROR

In the twenty-first century, Islam and Muslims have taken on a new salience in the construction of (white) American identity, with the male terrorist as a frightening embodiment of unassimilable difference. To be sure, Muslims and the Middle East were on American minds long before the September 11 attacks, with the OPEC-driven oil crises of the 1970s, Iran's 1979 revolution, and the Libyan-sponsored airplane hijacking in the 1980s. However, these events were overshadowed by, and understood within the frame of, the Cold War. So long as it endured, communists were cast as America's main enemy. During the 1980s, for instance, the United States allied with religious Muslims, funding the Afghan *mujahidin* who were fighting the Soviet army.

The fall of the communist bloc overlapped with a series of attacks on American targets in the United States and overseas by Muslim extremist groups, including al-Qaeda. The first World Trade Center bombing (1993) was followed by bombings of Air Force housing in Saudi Arabia (Khobar Towers, 1996), East African embassies (Nairobi and Dar El Salaam, 1998), and a Navy vessel (USS Cole, 2000), as well as the thwarted Millennium plot (Oregon, 1999). All helped shift American attention to a new enemy. The 2001 attacks and their aftermath cemented the figure of the Muslim terrorist as the prime threat to American safety—a strengthening of existing pop-culture images of Arab villains (Shaheen, Arjana). U.S.-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, justified on shaky grounds including pursuit of the attackers, punishing complicit governments, possession of weapons of mass destruction, or liberation of oppressed Muslim women, have mired the United States in a seemingly never-ending War on Terror. Intervention has led to hundreds of thousands of direct and indirect civilian casualties in the region, far surpassing the percentage of Americans killed on 9/11.

Most Americans think about this war's toll less in terms of Muslim deaths and suffering overseas than its impact on American soldiers killed or physically, mentally, or morally injured, and the weight of these deaths and injuries on military spouses and families.[2] Although Brockmann wrote *Into the Night* and *Gone Too Far* in the post-9/11 climate of fear of Muslims, her oeuvre is "less an affirmation of predominant political ideology than might be suspected of novels in the warrior romance category" (Kamble, "Patriotism" 160). She acknowledges the messiness of war and the toll it takes on both

American soldiers and on (Muslim) civilians in conflict zones. Moreover, her Troubleshooters bad guys come in many flavors. Some, like al-Qaeda (TS #5, TS #6, TS#7), are explicitly Muslim; others, including Central Asian airplane hijackers, implicitly so (TS #3). Religious extremists collaborate with garden-variety wrongdoers. A non-Muslim mercenary does the bidding of Muslim extremists off-screen, then seeks revenge for personal losses (TS #1 20, 205). Drugs and weapons smugglers who dabble in misogynist violence and pornography are mixed up with Muslim terrorists (TS #11). Other terrorists include the right-wing, patriarchal, white supremacist (and hypocritically anti-Muslim) Freedom Network (TS #8, #13, described [TDD #7 7] as “homegrown terrorists with racist, Neo-Nazi leanings and a fierce hatred for the federal government.”). Other installments feature dictator/drug lords (TS #4, #10), serial killers (TS #9, #15) and human traffickers (TS #16).

In the two books published directly after 9/11, in which Middle Eastern/Muslim terrorists threaten American institutions, Brockmann acknowledges and works to counter anti-Arab, anti-Muslim bias. Her work can be understood as part of a push—supported at least rhetorically by then-president George W. Bush—to refuse the equation of Islam with terrorism. In the decade and a half that followed, culminating in the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the idea that Muslims are necessarily America’s enemies has gained traction. A network of well-funded individuals and groups has deliberately cultivated anti-Muslim sentiment (Center for American Progress, Fear, Inc., Fear, Inc. 2.0); and the idea that Islam is incompatible with American life has moved from fringe to mainstream (Bail). The so-called Muslim bans enacted by executive order in early 2017 build on earlier anti-terrorist immigration restrictions and government surveillance programs, as well as clash-of-civilizations ideologies, as does the administration’s decision to focus its Countering Violent Extremism program solely on Islamic extremism.

These recent alarming developments draw on centuries of ideas about Islam and Muslims (Lyons, Arjana)—mostly but not exclusively negative. Western discourses around Islam, gender, and sexuality have long relied on a sustained tension between attraction and repulsion (Ali, *Sexual Ethics, Lives of Muhammad*). Building on the work of scholars including Edward Said, Lila Abu Lughod coined the term *Islamland* to describe the imaginary universe that Muslims inhabit in the mind of many Westerners. In Islamland, women are oppressed, men are patriarchal, and religion determines everything. Timeless and unchanging, Islamland bears only tenuous relationship to actual Muslim or Middle Eastern settings. So, too, Islamland’s shadow: Arabiastan (Jarmakani, *An Imperialist Love Story* 11-13). Amira Jarmakani’s term *Arabiastan* names the fictionalized, anonymized Gulf kingdoms in which astoundingly virile, impossibly wealthy, often royal sheikh heroes find their happily-ever-afters in the arms of plucky, usually white do-gooder heroines.

Brockmann navigates between these poles throughout the Troubleshooter series, steering closer to Islamland than to Arabiastan with her portrayal of the fictional Kazbekistan, “nicknamed The Pit” (TS #3 63). There, corrupt warlords rule through violence and women and girls suffer terribly (e.g., TS #7 93-94). Though Iraq and Afghanistan appear, the fictional Kazbekistan looms larger.[3] Notably, though, Brockmann’s depictions of Kazbekistan and its extremists, including the hijackers who take over a plane in the series’ third installment—written before 9/11 but released shortly after—scrupulously avoid making the bad guys piously Muslim or assigning them religious motivations. Still, Islamland tropes remain recognizable: in her 2008 survey of Brockmann’s work, Sarah Frantz describes Troubleshooters’ invocation of “the harsh realities of life in a third-world Islamic

nation” (13) even though religion remains implicit. Brockmann’s immediate post-9/11 Troubleshooters novels blend reticence about and direct engagement with stereotypes about Islam and Muslims even as they imagine terrorism on U.S. soil.

2. TROUBLESHOOTING HOMELAND SECURITY

Although most SEAL activity takes place outside the continental United States, *Into the Night* (TS #5) imagines a domestic target: al-Qaeda plans to assassinate the president when he visits Team Sixteen’s San Diego naval base. The book’s primary romance is between a SEAL lieutenant and a White House staffer. A secondary storyline tracks the imploding marriage of Sam and Mary Lou Starrett and their involvements—past or current—with non-white partners. Mary Lou’s developing relationship with Ibrahim serves as the pivot for key character developments as well as the novel’s action, with inaccurate prejudices playing a key role in both. Sam’s multi-book relationship arc with mixed-race FBI sharpshooter Alyssa finds resolution in *Gone Too Far* (TS #6), as does Mary Lou and Ibrahim’s storyline.[4]

Mary Lou Starrett, née Morrison, begins as an unsympathetic character. A lower-class alcoholic with a somewhat traumatic past (TS #5 150-54; Teo 276), she and Sam have a hot but shallow affair mostly off page in *Over the Edge* (TS #3 8, 50). She turns up pregnant a few months after he’s broken things off, putting the brakes on the relationship finally started by Sam and Alyssa; he withdraws from that relationship to do what he considers the honorable thing, marrying Mary Lou (TS #3 374-5, 383-86).

By the time *Into the Night* opens, their marriage has badly stagnated. Both love their young daughter and Mary Lou remains committed to sobriety. She does her best to please Sam—keeping house impeccably, being sexually available—but cannot or will not acknowledge Sam’s difficult wartime experiences. After realizing that she deplored any show of weakness on his part, Sam “had given up trying to make his marriage work ... and started merely to endure” (TS #5 185). Sam came to understand that “she didn’t love him any more than he loved her. She loved the *idea* of him, sure. She maybe even loved the image she’d built of him in her head—some superman who never doubted himself, never faltered, and never failed” (TS #5 185). Sam believes that Mary Lou “had no real desire to get to know him—especially if the real him deviated from the picture-perfect super-him she held in her head” (TS #5 185). She wanted the fantasy SEAL and the fantasy home-life, not a real man with emotions and vulnerabilities (similarly, TS #6 191). Mary Lou’s “denial” of “the complexity and reality of his character” appears in *Into the Night* as “what dooms her relationship with Sam” (Frantz, “I’ve tried my entire life” 211).

As her marriage falls apart, two very different men befriend and court Mary Lou. Bob Schwegel is an attractive white man she runs into repeatedly, first at the library and then elsewhere. Mary Lou thinks that he “looked like Heath Ledger’s older, sexier brother” (TS #5 94). She is flattered and a bit surprised at the attention he pays to her and her daughter, such as offering to carry her books and load them in her car’s trunk, until she learns that he is an insurance salesman; she then presumes his attentiveness is designed to sell her a policy. He eventually tries to seduce her. Her other suitor is Saudi-born landscaper Ibrahim Rahman: dark-skinned, bearded, and foreign. Mary Lou had thought, when she first saw him, that “he

looked as if he might spend his free time organizing an al-Qaeda terrorist cell” (TS #5 81). While Bob reminds her of a Hollywood star, Ibrahim looks like a film villain, “the homicidal terroristic Muslim [who] stalks the Western social imaginary” (Arjana 2). The more Mary Lou learns, though, the more Ibrahim does not conform to her mental model of an Arab Muslim. Like her, he is a recovering alcoholic; he explains that though “*Muslims* have laws in which drinking alcohol is forbidden ... many still do [drink]” (TS #5 82, emphasis in original).

As Mary Lou’s marriage deteriorates, she interacts with these two men, flirting with Bob and coming to rely on Ibrahim as a support for her sobriety (e.g., TS #5 294-297). Meanwhile, Husaam Abdul Fattah has been surveilling Mary Lou. Brockmann sets up uncertainty about the terrorist’s identity: the things he does (make first contact with her, use her vehicle to sneak weapons onto the base where she works a menial part-time job) are things that intersect with Ibrahim’s actions, like making a duplicate car key for her.

Brockmann’s misdirection suggests to readers steeped in media portrayals of Arab Muslim terrorists that Ibrahim is leading a double life, deceiving Mary Lou, who remains unaware of the brewing assassination plot. However, readers eventually learn that Bob—actually Warren Canton from Kansas—is the terrorist. Although a Muslim, he is not “really ... a religious man” (TS #5 437); his conversion was motivated by the profit to be obtained from smuggling at the behest of al-Qaeda collaborators, and not any sincere belief: “He’d worship zucchini squash if it would help him bring home the kind of money he was earning these days” (430).[5]

Brockmann simultaneously plays to readers’ expectations, by making a Muslim with an Arabic name the villain, and confounds them: the villain is a white guy who goes by Bob while the brown man with the funny foreign name is trustworthy. FBI agent Jules Cassidy, who as a gay man knows about stereotypes, later observes: “We hear a name like Abdul-Fattah, and we automatically think terrorist, we think Arab, we think Muslim extremist. ... we *certainly* don’t think white American using an alias” (TS #6 497, emphasis in original). The “flip side of racial profiling” is the presumption of white innocence (497).

Even as Brockmann manipulates her readers into assuming, or at least worrying, that Ibrahim is a terrorist, she directly addresses the prejudices that led them to do so. Readers are privy to Mary Lou’s changing thoughts as well as to her interactions with Ibrahim. In her “Readers’ Guide to the Troubleshooter Series” (7), Brockmann lists *Into the Night’s* point-of-view characters (her term). She includes the hero and heroine of the main romantic storyline and the WWII subplot, Sam, Mary Lou, and “the terrorist.” (She presumably refrains from naming Husaam/Bob/Warren to avoid spoilers.) Despite Ibrahim’s centrality, readers learn only what others think about him.[6] Though he has been keeping the neighbors’ yard looking good, Mary Lou thinks, “really, after 9/11, who wanted strange Arabs prowling around their neighborhood?” (TS #5 81). After they have become friendly but long before the relationship turns romantic, Mary Lou is sitting on a neighbor’s step, and he asks whether he can join her. She says, “You don’t have to ask to sit down. It’s a free country.” He responds with an understated commentary on American racism: “Free more for some than for others. I’ve learned never to assume” (124-125). His reaction is not surprising when, as Sophia Arjana observes, “The portrayal of Muslims as the antithesis of good Americans is not only common—it is the norm” (10).

Mary Lou gradually gains enough distance from her initial prejudice to consider what “most people” would “assume, from the color of his skin and from the way he looked”: “that he was dangerous” (TS #5 125). She herself had done so, though her reaction had changed.

Yet she is not immune to powerful biases. Brockmann depicts Mary Lou's halting, tenuous, partial unlearning of racist stereotypes. Stereotypes are tenacious and undoing them involves reversals and uncertainties. On the one occasion Bob, Ibrahim, and Mary Lou are all in one place, Ibrahim walks away to speak with other Arab men who have come to see him. Bob mentions Ibrahim's name and his appearance to sow distrust, telling Mary Lou, "He could be the poster boy for al-Qaeda" (TS #5 277). Neither the reader nor Mary Lou yet knows that Bob is actually the al-Qaeda operative, but Mary Lou begins a heated rejoinder—"Well, he's not, and you're being racist to assume..."—only to break off, doubting herself, when one of the "darkly complexioned" men attacks Ibrahim (277-78). (She later learns that they are his brothers; the argument is about nothing more sinister than the family car dealership.) When her emotions run high, Mary Lou reacts with racist assumptions. When the novel's action comes to a head, Mary Lou—who has already declared her love for Ibrahim—wonders whether he is, in fact, a terrorist. The reader knows better, but Mary Lou still worries that Ibrahim and his brothers, "all those Arabic faces and voices, dark with anger" (444), might be responsible for the attack at the naval base.

When the attack occurs, both Ibrahim and Bob/Husaam are in the audience. The terrorist mastermind has used his whiteness to enter the base with minimal scrutiny. He reflects: "Despite claims that this country avoided racial profiling, there were far more places he could go with his fair skin and light-colored eyes and hair than could most people who had such an obviously Muslim name" (TS #5 429). He manipulates a group of white bikers to beat up Ibrahim by insinuating that Ibrahim is doing something suspicious. Ibrahim suffers serious injuries. Because attention is diverted to the man who looks like a terrorist, the real terrorist escapes (447), just as he counts on (458).

3. TROUBLESHOOTING THE HERO

In American popular culture, the (Arab/Muslim) terrorist and the (white/American) military hero starkly oppose one another (Shaheen, Arjana). However, soldiers, particularly the spec-ops warriors and Navy SEALs who have risen to unprecedented cultural prominence in the last decade and a half (Chelton), are at times problematically like their terrorist opponents. They use secrecy and stealth; they kill without qualms. Jayashree Kamblé argues that the "warrior hero" often presents "a critique of American patriotic aggression" ("Patriotism" 153). As she notes, "many novels waver between expressing a 'support our troops' rhetoric and agonizing over the post-traumatic stress and moral impoverishment that soldiers experience as a result of combat" (154). This is certainly true for Brockmann's novels—indeed, Sam's sadness and guilt over agonizing choices he has had to make is something that Mary Lou cannot accept.

In addition to the soldier, the terrorist has another shadow: the sheikh. If Islamland sutures negative images of Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners into a fabricated whole, Arabiastan offers the flip side of Orientalist stereotypes: "fantastical kingdom[s]" (Holden 7) and "fairy-tale sheikhdoms superimposed over, and obliterating, the complex geopolitical realities of the Middle East" (Teo 214). Recent scholarship on sheikh romances emphasizes the (white) liberal feminist fantasies they shore up. Stacy Holden (17) suggests that sheikh novels are "a form of socio-political erotica" providing "explicit images and arousing

fantasies in which Arabs and Americans ultimately live together in peace.” Teo likewise observes that they are one of the few positive pop culture representations of Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East (25-26), though Jarmakani emphasizes more sinister implications of the subgenre (*Imperialist Love Story*).

In desert romances, the white heroine inspires the sheikh to reform or modernize his (fictional) nation (Jarmakani, “Sheikh”; Holden), or supports him in the face of opposition. Sheikh romances simultaneously draw on and recast stereotypes about racialized Arab/Muslim men. Unlike other violent, backward Arab/Muslim men, the hero rejects despotism, religious extremism, and absolutism. He also rejects passive Muslim women (Teo 14). Unlike the figure more prevalent in “the West’s *imaginaire* of Islam” of “the Muslim as a frightening adversary, an outside enemy ... who, due to an intrinsic alterity, must be excluded from American and European landscapes” (Arjana 2), in liberal feminist-Orientalist desert romances, the sheikh’s transformation at the hands of the white woman renders him acceptable.

Brockmann’s approach differs. Rather than selectively replacing “negative stereotypes” of vaguely Arab/Muslim characters with “exotically upbeat” ones as sheikh romances do (Holden 3), or writing exoticized Muslim-ish characters into military roles as Lindsay McKenna has, Brockmann writes an Arab character who mostly confounds these stereotypes.[7] Troubleshooters storylines treat Arab and Muslim *Americans* sympathetically while “confirming the dominant narrative ... that Muslim terrorists are the enemies of the United States” and “the American military ... is justified in waging war on Afghanistan” and elsewhere (Teo 277).

Brockmann never directly confronts the romanticized sheikh. Instead, she displaces the fantasy narrative of racial reconciliation from Arabiastan to America, and flips the script: it is the heroine, not the hero, who undergoes transformation. In the desert novels, with their literal embrace of white women, sheikh heroes metaphorically embrace companionate marriage and liberal feminist projects.[8] The white savior woman is not only their love but also the partner in or catalyst for transforming their societies. In *Into the Night* and *Gone Too Far*, on the other hand, it is not the Arab man but the white woman who is transformed, and her society that requires further transformation.[9]

Ibrahim, intermittently exotic and ambivalently American, offers a beta rejoinder to dominant models of heroic masculinity, challenging certain racialized assumptions about Arab/Muslim men. Ibrahim serves as an anti-sheikh without being his terrorist doppelganger. He grew up in California. He lives in a mundane world of family businesses rather than royal politics: a family dispute over an arranged marriage involves a proposed merger with his fiancée’s family’s BMW dealership (TS #5 295, 322-23). He is neither aggressively Westernized nor strictly devout. He resembles neither Harlequin Presents’ wealthy, suave sheikhs nor Brockmann’s larger-than-life and twice as sexy SEALs.

Central to the sheikh genre is its hero: a virile alpha male with money, which symbolizes and grants power (Cohn): “Animalistic yet sensitive, dark and sexy, this desert prince emanates manliness and raw sexual power” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist Love Story* 1). The sheikh, “largely the descendent of the Byronic hero commingled with the Gothic villain,” has connotations of “irresistible, ruthless, masterful, and over-sexualized masculinity” (Teo 160, 1). Arjana notes that “[m]ale Muslim monsters are typically hyper-masculine—aggressive, overly sexual, and violent—characters that also function as tableaux of desire and fantasy” (11). These constructions of monstrous Muslim masculinity resonate with white depictions

of Black men, including but not limited to African Muslims (Arjana). “Muslim monsters,” Arjana (15) writes, “are not just masculine—they are outrageously so, with superhuman sexual powers, an otherworldly kind of strength, and an unfathomable propensity for violence.”[10]

To be desirable, though, a sheikh hero must be more manly than monstrous. In other words, he must be differentiated from his terrorist counterpart. Readers who cannot separate them—like the reader who insists that “my enjoyment of reading romances with Arab hero’s [sic] and harems ... came down with the twin towers”—typically reject the subgenre entirely (Teo 191; also Jarmanaki, *Imperialist Love Story* 13, 134-37). Sheikh romances partly effect this separation between man and monster by effacing religion: Islam, strongly associated with terrorism in many minds, becomes largely incidental. The *Harlequin Presents*’ sheikh hero will not be “too Muslim.” He observes no religious rituals. He drinks wines with dinner, signaling not just his breach of religious rules but also his elite sensibility. He probably attended Oxford or an Ivy League school. Thus, although “[t]he sheikh in this post-9/11 novel is ethnically Arab”—unlike earlier iterations where he was proven racially European (read: white)—“he is culturally quite Western in his orientation” (Holden 5).

Though religion in no way dominates Brockmann’s discussion of Ibrahim, neither is it simply ignored. Ibrahim abstains from drinking—but as part of a struggle with addiction.[11] This does not mean a complete rejection of Islam: though his parents “chose to embrace the ways of the West and to serve and drink alcohol ... yet we observed Ramadan and practiced our faith in other ways” (TS#5 83). He points out the messiness of people’s religious practice, and rejects simple either/or categorizations.

Ibrahim’s hybrid dress style contrasts with sheikh heroes’ desert robes or bespoke suits; he “dressed kind of the way Jesus might dress if He were alive today” (TS# 5 124). His “loose pants,” “leather sandals,” and “worn-out T-shirt” are hybrid garb rather than the robes that symbolize sheikh heroes’ cultural background and masculine potency (Jarmakani, *Imperialist Love Story* 158; Holden 9; Teo 237). Rather than display professional status or family wealth, his nondescript clothing suits the manual labor he performs. Yet he doesn’t wear that most American of garments: jeans. And, T-shirt notwithstanding, his skin tone and beard enable others to identify him as Arab and Muslim. His physical attributes and grooming as well as his clothes distinguish him from others. Mary Lou reflects on a meeting with Bob: “His blond hair gleamed in the sunshine, his chin was smoothly shaved, and his shirt was crisply white—obviously freshly laundered beneath his well-tailored business suit” (TS #5 231). These descriptions set up repeated contrasts: Ibrahim is dark; Bob is blond. Ibrahim is bearded; Bob is clean-shaven. Bob wears a pristine white shirt and a well-cut suit, while Ibrahim wears a “worn-out T shirt” and “loose pants.” While both men smell good, Ibrahim scent garners additional descriptions: “like fresh-cut grass and some kind of exotic fragrance—sandalwood” (223). Ibrahim’s clothing contrasts also with the “more expensive” suits and “shiny sweat suit” worn by three of his countrymen, who accost him when they are out together, building suspicion about him (277), and with the uniforms SEALs routinely wear.

Ibrahim differs from sheikh heroes not only in having a different class status, as manifest in his clothing and occupation, but also in the desexualized manner in which Brockmann describes him. His appearance is unusual, even appealing, but not lust-inducing. His accent is “lilting” (TS #5 251) and his voice is “musical, gentle” (341).[12] Ibrahim is “so very foreign-looking” and “dark” (TS #5 125), but this exoticism remains mostly divorced

from sizzle or sex appeal. Unlike most sheikh romances, where if either partner is sexually inexperienced or hesitant it will be the (white) woman (Jarmakani, *An Imperialist Love Story* 163), Ibrahim is chaste. Though he is attracted to Mary Lou, apart from one “meltingly lovely” kiss in which he proves himself “gentle but in complete command” (TS #5 341), they do not become physically involved in *Into the Night*. Indeed, Ibrahim’s restraint affects Mary Lou’s modus operandi. The former bar bunny blushes when he complements her beauty. Though “there was nothing remotely ... *salacious* in his eyes, and yet she’d never felt so completely overwhelmed before just from gazing back at a man” (252, emphasis in original). When talking with Ibrahim about accepting a dinner invitation from Bob, she ponders “what it would feel like to kiss a man with a beard like Ibrahim’s. What would it be like to make love to a man with such warm, all-seeing, yet gentle eyes?” And then she chastises herself: “Not that *that* would ever happen” (252, emphasis in original). Mary Lou later reflects that she “would have [cheated] if he’d have let me. I was that desperate” (TS #6 148). Ibrahim only refers obliquely to his desire for her; when they are committed at the end of *Gone Too Far*, he still speaks of spending the night together only via “innuendo.” He accompanies it with a sort of marriage proposal, giving Mary Lou the option to defer “our first night together until after we’re married” (476). He does not, however, insist on waiting, although their intimacy remains off-page.

Mary Lou and Ibrahim’s developing relationship provides numerous chances for them to (mis)communicate about gender, race, and double-standards. With their exchanges, Brockmann depicts an America that fails to meet its lofty ideals of racial or sexual equality. In “characterizing inequality as an Oriental practice that should not exist in the West” (Teo 267), Mary Lou occasionally critiques sexist practices and assumptions by figuring them as un-American (e.g., TS #5 374-76). In such conversations, she displays what Joyce Zonana calls “feminist orientalism,” strategies that “figur[e] objectionable aspects of life in the West as ‘Eastern’” to “define their project as the removal of Eastern elements from Western life” (Zonana, quoted in Teo 232). Yet when Mary Lou talks to Ibrahim about how things are “here” in America as opposed to over there, readers should understand that she is not entirely reliable.

Mary Lou is not only an unreliable analyst of gender politics but also a failed feminist: she tried (and failed) to woo Sam by making herself submissive, compliant, and domestically perfect (TS #5 104-106, 319-21). According to Jarmakani, sheikh novels reject the Arab woman who makes herself small and subordinates her opinions, personhood, and desires to make herself agreeable (*Imperialist Romance* 80-82, 112-115). In *Into The Night*, this stereotype is displaced onto a white woman. Interestingly, both Ibrahim (TS #5 336-38) and Sam (321-22) agree that a loveless marriage for the sake of security is an unacceptable way for a woman to live. In being or becoming (again) herself, refusing to continue acting like a doormat, Mary Lou reminds Sam of her positive qualities—even as she leaves him. Mary Lou’s internalized sexism is subtly interwoven with her stereotypical ideas about Muslim gender norms. However, rather than make this realization or a recovery from retrograde gender norms the centerpiece of Mary Lou’s character arc, Brockmann prioritizes Mary Lou’s awareness of her own racist assumptions about non-white men, and fear of public opinion about her involvement in an interracial relationship. She must overcome both to have a successful relationship with Ibrahim.

4. TROUBLESHOOTING RACISM, ROMANCING DIFFERENCE

Mary Lou and Ibrahim's relationship illustrates a key concern of Brockmann's oeuvre: the ugliness and harmful effects of stereotypes and the possibility of moving past them. Like Brockmann's other series, *Troubleshooters* has a somewhat diverse cast of characters. To a greater extent than most white authors, Brockmann explicitly acknowledges and connects racism, sexism, and discrimination based on sexual orientation. Prejudice plays a role in many of her novels. *Harvard's Education* (TDD #5) features an African-American hero and heroine and draws crucial parallels between racist bigotry and sexism. The hero, acutely aware of racism (148-50), is offended when the heroine describes him as a bigot for holding sexist ideas (61). In *Troubleshooters*, racism and sexism play significant roles as does anti-gay prejudice. Gay FBI agent Jules Cassidy, Alyssa's partner until she resigns to join *Troubleshooters*, often remarks on the negative impact of stereotypes. His character arc is the prime, although not the only, place that characters confront stereotypes and assumptions about gay people.[13]

Sam is central to discussions about racism, sexism, homophobia and the parallels among them. Alyssa thinks he's racist (she's wrong, as she will eventually learn in *Gone Too Far*), sexist (she's not entirely wrong), and homophobic (he starts out that way, but he changes, as he gets to know Jules). In one encounter, Sam complains to Jules that Alyssa's "expectations" of him get in the way: "She thinks I'm some rednecked asshole ... She thinks she knows me, but she doesn't have a clue. She's prejudged, pre-labeled, and pre-rejected me. How the fuck do you fight that?" Jules replies, "Well, gee, I couldn't *possibly* know what that's like." Sam realizes that, "As a gay man, Jules had spent most of his life prejudged, pre-labeled, and pre-rejected by most of society," including Sam himself (TS #3 309-10, emphasis in original). Sam's embeddedness in interracial relationships—romance, friendship, and family—is where the *Troubleshooters* books most engage the questions of race.

Interracial relationships figure in several Brockmann novels, often merely incidentally.[14] In *Into the Night* and *Gone Too Far*, however, the interracial dimensions of romantic relationships pose a crucial barrier (Regis 2003) to successful romantic resolutions, whether because of individual prejudice or broader societal racism. In Mary Lou and Ibrahim's secondary romance, in the ultimate resolution of Sam and Alyssa's romance, and in the historical WWII plotline interwoven in the latter novel, interracial elements dominate. Unlike in *Into the Night*, where the primary romance and the WWII subplot feature white couples, of the four engagements/marriages that take place in *Gone Too Far*, only one is a mono-racial couple: Kelly Ashton and Tom Paoletti, both white, whose perfunctory wedding follows a protracted engagement. Overcoming stereotypes, which pose one barrier to successful interracial relationships, is crucial to the story arc of *Into the Night* and *Gone Too Far*, and confronting—however incompletely—her own racism is a "redeeming" character development for Mary Lou (Leapheart).

Into the Night focuses on racial profiling of Arabs; in *Gone Too Far*, anti-Muslim/anti-Arab bigotry remains a concern (e.g., TS #6 148-49) but it cedes thematic centrality to anti-black racism. The thematic shift in *Gone Too Far* to anti-black racism suggests new questions about racial identity and categorization in *Into the Night* – especially as they are gendered and linked to reproduction. Where British romances from the early twentieth century were particularly preoccupied by miscegenation, the hybrid progeny resultant from the union of

Arab male and white female (Teo), in the US context as a whole, anti-blackness has been the central structuring principle of racially-based legal discrimination. Of course, the two are not easily separated. When Mary first kisses Ibrahim she thinks about the fact that anyone could see her kissing someone “black. Or brown. Certainly non-white” (TS #5 341).

Mary Lou mostly thinks about race in black and white terms. If “the specter of the silent and oppressed Arabiastani woman haunts the [sheikh] novel as a compelling absent presence” (Jarmakani, *Imperialist Love Story*, 113), in *Troubleshooters* the other woman who haunts Mary Lou’s floundering marriage is black. Her statement that “Alyssa’s black” (TS #5 338) is not precisely wrong; Alyssa sometimes describes herself as a “black woman” though she has mixed heritage (TS #3 47). When Mary Lou thinks of Sam and Alyssa having children, Mary Lou imagines their future son would be black, and that it would be difficult for Sam, as a white man, to raise a black child (TS #5 141, 339).[15] Without disagreeing with Mary Lou’s statement that “It’s way harder for a young black man to succeed in America than a young white man,” Ibrahim calmly confronts her with the genocidal logic of her thinking: “So should all non-white men and women in America therefore stop having children simply because life will be harder for them than it will be for your white children?” (TS #5 339). Much later, when she tells Ibrahim she loves him, he reminds her that she had worried about the well-being of dark-skinned children in a world that disadvantages them and warns that, “My sons may have skin as dark as mine” (TS #5 427). She acknowledges the potential difficulties, but affirms that she’s no longer looking for life to be easy. (Interestingly, both scenarios imagine sons rather than daughters, focusing on discrimination toward men and boys of color and ignoring girls and women of color.)

Over the course of these novels, Mary Lou shifts from working to maintain her fantasy American dream of marriage to a heroic (white) SEAL to being in love with and wanting to build a life with a dark-skinned Arab-American man – despite having once been so strongly opposed to interracial relationships that she’d have refused to marry “Jesus himself” if he came “down from heaven” but “didn’t have the same skin color she had”[16] (141). Despite such acknowledgments of her racism, *Into the Night* framed the problem with her marriage to Sam as her inability to accept Sam’s full humanity, including his ambivalence about deploying violence. In *Gone Too Far*, however, readers learn that her racism posed the most significant obstacle to marital harmony. Sam explains to Alyssa that it was when he learned Mary Lou was a racist that he abandoned any attempt to save their marriage: “It made her completely unattractive to me. ... I couldn’t get past it. ... *That* was when our marriage ended” (TS #6 366, emphasis in original). Her racism not only posed an obstacle to a liaison with Ibrahim, it had kept her from happiness with a white man.

Three interracial relationships structure *Gone Too Far*. First is that between Mary Lou and Ibrahim. Although they are apart for most of the novel, the question arises of how Mary Lou might have become involved with a terrorist. As Sam, Alyssa, and the FBI search for her, they consider various possibilities. An extramarital affair seems the most likely explanation for her (unwitting) involvement in the terrorist plot, but Sam cannot believe that she is romantically or sexually involved with Ibrahim. He cannot imagine that she is having sex with “an Arab-American with very dark skin” (TS #6 339) or indeed any “man who wasn’t Wonder Bread white” (340). Eventually, as those searching for the terrorist consider the he may not be Arab, Sam comes to wonder if “Rahman’s not the tango? What if it’s ... a white guy, right, so Mary Lou’s okay sleeping with him[?]” (368) Though Sam is unaware, readers know that Mary Lou has slept with neither Ibrahim nor the white terrorist, has gotten past

her aversion to dark skin and her fears of being judged by others for being involved with a non-white man and of having biracial children (TS #5 395, 427).

In the other two relationship plots, which eventually intersect, race and racism play essential roles. In the primary romance storyline, between Sam and Alyssa, a black woman's knowledge about a white man's perspectives on race proves essential to her coming to know and trust him. Early in the novel, Alyssa declares, "Sam Starrett was full of surprises, not the least of them being that his best friend from his childhood was black" (TS #6 59). The World War II plot line involves a marriage between a former Tuskegee Airman and a white woman. This woman turns out to be Sam's aunt Dot, his abusive, racist father's sister. Her husband Walt serves as a surrogate father to Sam. The childhood friend is actually Sam's first cousin once removed, Walt and Dot's grandchild. Alyssa eventually realizes that the cousins resemble each other: "God, Sam, he even *looks* like you." Sam agrees, pointing out that "most people can't see past the different skin tones" (TS #6 286, emphasis in original).

Brockmann here presents skin color as a superficial marker that can disguise underlying similarities or affinities. Perceiving beyond surface appearances is necessary for real knowledge, and real knowledge is necessary for true relationships (Frantz, "I've tried my entire life"). In this story arc, interracial relationships require people to dig deeper, overcoming first impressions and socially-generated assumptions, whether positive or negative.

Alyssa, who is open minded about racial difference, must move past what she thinks she knows about Sam to make a relationship work. She stereotypes Sam from their contentious first meeting where she decides he is a "redneck asshole" (TS #1 285). She must reject her original, erroneous view of him before she and Sam can pair up successfully. Mary Lou was unable to get past a fixed notion of the unflinchingly patriotic soldier hero to love Sam as a person with foibles and flaws. Yet she overcomes dehumanizing stereotypes of violent, fanatical, monstrous Muslim men (Arjana, Lyons) to know, accept, and love Ibrahim as an individual. If *Into the Night's* lesson is that racial profiling makes Americans less safe, the moral of *Gone Too Far* might be summed up as: racists don't deserve happily-ever-afters. And if stereotypes are perilous for national security, the greater danger, Brockmann seems to suggest, is that they prevent real and lasting love.

CONCLUSION

Romance novels set stories of individual transformation within larger social structures to which they may pay more or less attention as author perspective and subgenre convention dictate. Contemporary novels, including those with suspense storylines, reflect on and engage with ongoing political and social controversies as well as established institutions and norms. In the case of the Troubleshooter novels, one major context is American military and intelligence involvement with the Middle East/Muslim terrorism; another is prejudice and discrimination in American society. Brockmann is less critical about the former than the latter. She does raise questions of moral injury to American soldiers and acknowledges the undeserved suffering of Middle Eastern/Muslim civilians harmed by American attacks. However, she largely accepts the basic framing of the War on Terror and American militarism. She more directly criticizes mainstream racial, religious, and sexual-

orientation-based bias and discrimination within the United States. In addition to characters who confront and unlearn their own prejudices, as Mary Lou does, sympathetic (gay, female, and/or non-white) characters confront others' biases, often individual and sometimes institutional (e.g., Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the rule barring women from SEAL teams). Brockmann's portrayal of Ibrahim subverts both contemporary American anti-Muslim discourse and romance genre norms.

Brockmann simultaneously deploys and undercuts stereotypes, holding difference and sameness in tension. In addition to depicting white men who confound assumptions that Southerners will be racist or soldiers will be homophobic, she individualizes and humanizes members of marginalized groups. Amy Burge has argued that Orientalist "romance manipulates its hybrid representations of religious and ethnic difference in order to create successful romantic unions" (7). She finds that "medieval and modern romance[s] require a flattening of difference—and elision of strangeness—rather than an embracing of otherness" (180-81). Brockmann, whose novels draw from and also subvert Orientalist topoi and narrative structures, values difference in part for its instrumental value. Despite the persistence of racist, sexist, and homophobic social structures, her heroes and heroines establish connections with others—family, friends, and lovers—across difference. As Ibrahim and Mary Lou agree, radical transformation of unjust realities will be a long time coming. In the meantime, there is love.

[1] Drawing on the no longer operational "Sheikhs and Desert Love" website, Amira Jarmakani (*An Imperialist Love Story*, ix) notes that there were 100 sheikh romances when she began her research in 2008, a number which "ballooned to 267" during her writing. Amy Burge's study of Harlequin Mills & Boon shows a significant rise in the prominence of the subgenre between 2000 and 2009 in one publisher's output (29). An imprecise measurement shows additional growth: an April 2017 search of Amazon's "Books" category for "sheikh romance" returned 1490 results; the keyword "sheikh" alone yielded 4233 results. Even if inadvertent duplicates, self-published titles, and non-romance items are included in those counts, a figure closer to 1,000 would still represent an astonishing increase in commercially-published sheikh romances in a relatively short period.

[2] This framing ignores the numerous Muslims who have served in the American armed forces (cf. Curtis). Also note the military romances discussed below with heroes and/or heroines from Muslim backgrounds.

[3] Burge distinguishes among sheikh, pseudo-sheikh, and desert romance in her analysis of Orientalist romances (31-2). In some Troubleshooters novels, Kazbekistan functions, as in desert romances, as the "romance East" (14) backdrop against which American heroes and heroines have adventures and fall in love.

[4] The pair meet in TS #1, have an "explosive sexual encounter" (Frantz, "Suzanne Brockmann" 11) in TS #2, and seem to begin a promising relationship in TS #3, which is curtailed by Sam's involvement with Mary Lou. Echoes of the relationship resonate, if only in dreams and Mary Lou's jealousy, in the next two novels (e.g., TS #4 259-61). Sarah S. G. Frantz [Lyons] provides a compelling account of this arc in "I've tried my entire life."

[5] *Gone Too Far* gives slightly more backstory: from a young age he had a Saudi stepfather, and spent time in the Middle East as a young man; he left Harvard and did a jihadi version of the "Grand Tour" (TS #6 496). If the sheikh's journey is from Arabiastan to the Ivies, as explored below, "Bob" does the journey in reverse.

[6] Ibrahim does not become a point-of-view character in *Gone Too Far* either (“Readers’ Guide” 8).

[7] Since the 1980s, Lindsay McKenna has written scores of romances featuring military protagonists. McKenna’s *Taking Fire* (2015) features a half-Afghan black-ops Marine sniper “shadow warrior” heroine and a half-Saudi Navy SEAL hero. Although both have “devout” Muslim fathers (330-31), neither main character is observant. Both drink alcohol (133) and eat pork (240). The heroine proclaims herself “spiritual, not religious” (331). Heroine Khatereh “Khat” Shinwari tells the hero, Michael Tarik: “You are an ancient warrior who has stepped into today’s world, in my eyes. You have the heart, the morals and values of the finest of the old guard Middle Eastern caliphs and chieftains of so long ago” (368).

[8] Teo goes so far as to claim that, “The modern sheik novel is nothing if not a vehicle for liberal feminist concerns” (267).

[9] Teo suggests that “the sheik romance (perhaps more so than most other romantic subgenres) is about the white heroine’s empowerment in a variety of ways: sexually, emotionally, financially, and socially” (281). Erin Young remarks on the transformation of heroines (206), but it is their Asian-ness that is transformed by the hero’s whiteness/Americanness. Here, Mary Lou’s racist whiteness must be transformed so that America can become what it ought to be.

[10] Arab-Muslim literature also contains tropes of dangerous black sexuality (Malti-Douglas 1991). Such (racialized) monsters are increasingly familiar in paranormal romances, which features possessive and violent alien, vampire, and shape-shifting heroes.

[11] Another Muslim-ish hero struggling with alcoholism is the half-Italian, half-Iranian Reza Iaconelli from *All For You* (2014), in Jessica Scott’s “Coming Home” series, which highlights war’s effects on active-duty soldiers and military families. Islam is never mentioned, only ethnicity. A fellow soldier harasses him: “I know that like half of them are your cousins and all but I really fucking hate Iraq.” He responds, “My mom was Iranian, shithead. Not every brown guy from the Middle East is an Arab” (145). Despite this blithe dismissal, Reza later admits to the heroine, Emily: “Let’s just say that there are some members of my family who wanted me to think long and hard about fighting a war against our people.” This sense of religio-ethnic loyalty is not merely an Arab/Persian/Middle Eastern characteristic: it is his father who, by having “married a non-Catholic Persian woman” became “the apostate of the family” (232).

[12] Stereotypes are both powerful and malleable. What is charmingly exotic at one moment can be merely unintelligible, or even strange and threatening, the next. Writing about cinema, Arjana notes that “[t]he language of normative humanity is English; the language of the Other, the foreigner, and the monster is babble” (152). Mary Lou refers to Ibrahim’s spoken language as “gibberish,” “strange language,” and “babbling” (TS #5 277, 278). After Mary Lou and Ibrahim become involved, his speech becomes more intelligible; where previously she “couldn’t understand” (278), now she gets the gist without knowing the words: “She’d never heard Ibrahim curse before, and she wasn’t quite sure she’d heard him curse now, because whatever he said it wasn’t in English. She suspected, though, that it was the Arabic version of *holy shit*” (TS #6 459, emphasis in original). His accent becomes “musical, faintly British” (458).

[13] *All Through the Night*, in which Jules weds his partner, was the first romance from a major publisher to feature two heroes. (On Brockmann’s treatment of this character,

consult Kamblé, *Making Meaning*, 124-27, 128-29.) Homophobia and assumptions also play key roles in TS #8, *Hot Target*, which Brockmann dedicates to her gay son.

[14] In *Taylor's Temptation* (TDD #10), the hero is part Native American, and the heroine Irish-American, but their ethnic differences, treated in a brief meta-commentary (421), pose no obstacle to a relationship. In the Troubleshooters universe, what impedes a relationship between Max Bhagat, who has one Indian grandparent, and Italian-American Gina Vitagliano is not ethnic difference but a two-decade age difference as well as a traumatic past incident (their story is resolved in TS #10). In Vinh Murphy and Hannah Whitfield's relationship (TS #13), neither their racial differences—she is white, he is mixed-race (TS #7 41-42)—nor her deafness hinders their union; instead, Vinh still grieves the murder of his wife, who was Hannah's best friend.

[15] In the first Troubleshooters book, Joe Paoletti's sister says, when her daughter Mallory gets involved with an Asian-American (David Sullivan, who is adopted), that her "babies would have slanted eyes" (TS #1 348-9). Similar themes emerge from an African-American perspective (Foster); Erin Young analyzes one novel's treatment of undesirable mixing from an Asian perspective (213).

[16] This reference early on to Mary Lou's (impossible) marriage to Jesus alongside occasional references to Ibrahim as Jesus-like in his dress and calm, desexualized in his manner suggests the possibility of reading his character as a Christ figure.

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