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WRITING HISTORIES OF SEXUALITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Writing Histories of Sexuality in the Middle East¹

The study of histories of sexuality in the region that today we term the Middle East has only recently become a domain populated by historians, and much innovative work continues to be accomplished by literary scholars, social scientists, and, recently, art historians. This interdisciplinarity results in part from the fact that our primary sources confound modern disciplinary taxonomies — we encounter chronicles as literature, poetry as political satire, *belles lettres* as social commentary, painted images more sexually graphic than the written word — so that silences in one genre or field of study may be vocalized in another.

Because literary texts, particularly of the medieval and early modern periods, openly engaged sexual matters, literary and philological studies preceded the more purely historical. The buildup to histories of sexuality was gradual. The opening of the rich Ottoman archives following World War II facilitated social history and socially oriented political history (Iranian studies lacks a comparable archive). In the 1980s, women's and then gender history was a significant stimulus to exploration of social cultures, slavery, gender and politics, spatial configurations of gender, and so on. Important publications of the early 1990s focused specifically on the history of sexualities in the region, and since then the field has made steady if not spectacular progress.

Some preliminary observations may help to advance this forum's goal of facilitating comparative and transnational histories. First, the term "Middle East" is not a wholly accurate label for the region covered here, and its narrowness masks the rich potential for transnational history-writing that the actual history of the region invites. Only in the 19th century, with the loss of territory to European empires and overseas colonial powers, does it become an appropriate label (leaving aside quibbles over the terminology "middle" and "east"). Until then, the eastern Mediterranean, the North African coast, the Balkans, the Danube principalities, the Black Sea region, and substantial parts of the Caucasus and Central and South Asia were critical domains incorporated by the empires — Ottoman, Iranian, and colonial — that dominated from late medieval until modern times. The borderlands of these large imperial formations overlapped other cultural and political zones and indeed were sometimes traded back and forth. In other words, they had hybrid histories and so functioned as channels for the multidirectional flow of persons, ideas, and practices. The human landscape of the "Middle East" zone itself — from ancient times a "polyglot" amalgam of religions, languages, ethnicities, cultures, and geographies, as well as a middle zone in world commerce — fostered a climate receptive to exchange and opportunity for individuals to modify their sense of identity as global actors.²

Moreover, as Julia Clancy-Smith notes for the 19th century, the fact that European migrants and settlers in the Middle East and North Africa "straddled the shifting boundaries between 'European' and 'non-European'" makes the

drawing of culturally determined boundaries a risky business.³ Much the same could be said for the medieval and early modern periods. The recent surge in studies of captives, converts, renegades, and diplomats in the 16th and 17th centuries (as well as of repatriated captives and renegades) suggests similar forms of intimacies. Studies of the Venetian presence in Ottoman Istanbul, for example, are yielding numerous points of conflux: Venetian merchants who fathered children with slave women of various origins (Greek, Circassian, Hungarian); exiled criminals, male and female, for whom this largest city of the Mediterranean was a magnet; dragomen who served Venice but were natives of Istanbul.⁴ More important, the Islamic ban on enslaving one's fellow subjects, although frequently ignored, resulted in a practice of slavery that incorporated captive peoples from widely diverse origins. Ruling regimes systematically recruited outsiders into the governing class, and domestic regimes made use of slave concubines for reproductive purposes (the offspring of a free male and a slave concubine were considered freeborn). The implications of this hyper melting pot have yet to be fully explored, and we have considerably more understanding of confluences in the Mediterranean than in other hybrid regions of the broader "Middle East" zone.

Another general observation is that the relatively underdeveloped academic study of the history of sexuality in the region is at odds with the salience of sexuality — representations of love and desire, sexual etiquette, the biology of sex, the boundaries of licit sex, and so on — in many primary sources. Enough of these sources transcribe popular vernacular, for example sexual cursing and

slander, to suggest that “sex talk” was not uncommon. But until fairly recently, scholars in the field have imposed a degree of self-censorship with regard to sexuality, particularly homoeroticism, in part because of sensibilities in the region.⁵ On the other hand, most scholars have been careful to avoid the pitfall of celebrating the “openness” of Middle Eastern sexual attitudes — Islam was once famously described as a “sex-positive” religion — and to reconcile sexual explicitness in some sources with the erasure of all but heterosexual upper-class males and their voices in other sources.

There are limits to what a single review of histories of Middle Eastern sexualities can accomplish. Emphasis here has been placed on the premodern period, in part because it has yielded a greater abundance of source material than other periods in the region’s history, and thus has a longer tradition of sexuality studies. The essay reflects the fact that the preponderance of scholarship has focused on urban cultures and on Muslims, with less emphasis on Christian and Jewish communities of the region; scholarship has also privileged Sunni Muslim histories over those of the numerically smaller Shiite communities. Most of the works cited below are in English, reflecting the fact that the North American academy is the most prolific, although far from exclusive, site of publications on Middle Eastern sexualities. The globalization of the academic world, however, means that scholars working in English come from a broad range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, although valuable work on gender and sexuality flourishes in less accessible languages of the historical region (e.g.,

Bulgarian).⁶ Finally, it may be useful to note the availability of reference works that are appropriate for novices as well as specialists in the Middle Eastern field.⁷

The opening salvo was issued in 1975 by two North African sociologists who took on the topic of “Islamic sexuality,” the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and the Tunisian Abdelwahab Bouhdiba. Despite differing emphases — Mernissi, focusing on sexualized spatial boundaries, contrasted young Moroccan women’s rejection of norms of gender segregation with traditional restrictions on male-female contact, while Bouhdiba argued that an intrinsic harmony between Islam and (male) sexuality was perverted in contemporary practice — both privileged an abstracted Islam as a key determinant of sexual attitudes. Bouhdiba’s book created ripples in part because it broached topics that had previously been ignored or purposely avoided.⁸

Also in 1975, U.S. scholar Ronald Jennings published an article on women in Ottoman court records that proved pioneering. While it did not discuss sexuality per se, the article alerted historians to the richness and abundance of legal sources for the study of ordinary women and men, thus providing a counterpoint to the elitist outlook of many premodern literary genres and underlining the importance of rooting analysis in local socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural particulars. That women’s studies was arriving was announced by the appearance of two edited volumes that quickly found their place on new course syllabi: *Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak* (1977), an anthology of writings by and about women that spanned the entire Islamic period, and *Women in*

the Muslim World (1978), a first mapping of interdisciplinary approaches to the subject that combined historical with contemporary studies.⁹ Simultaneously, the importance of classical Arabic and Persian texts for the study of sexuality was being asserted. In 1978, the eminent Arabist Franz Rosenthal published a study of medieval medical views on homoerotic sex, and the following year saw *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, the proceedings of a UCLA conference convened in 1977.¹⁰ In chapters on literary genres, Sunni and Shiite legal texts, Sufi texts, and Jewish documents from medieval Cairo, this pioneering volume pointed to the variety of underutilized sources and the range of sexual phenomena they detailed and debated. By 1980, the stage was set. Basim Musallam's 1983 study of contraception, the first monograph to focus on sexual practice, combined erudition in the medieval sources with an eye to modern demographic methodologies. Judith Tucker's landmark 1985 study *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* examined the impact of modernizing technologies and ideologies on lower-class women in 19th-century Egypt and exposed the conditions of female slavery.¹¹

Meanwhile, studies of European mentalities were emerging that would have a profound impact on students of Middle Eastern cultures and histories. The problematic of the sexualized Western gaze eastward was advanced with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and of Alain Grosrichard's *Structure du s'éraïl: La fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'Occident classique* in 1979.¹² There were earlier studies of European representations of "the Orient"

and Islam, of course, but now ideology, discourse, and relations of power became inescapable scholarly preoccupations for many in the field of Middle Eastern history.¹³ Inadvertently, perhaps, Western culture began to loom as an implicit pole of social and cultural comparison, particularly in work dealing with the 18th century onward. This effect has occasionally summoned defensive stances from students of the Middle East, and has perhaps worked to the detriment of comparative studies with Asian and African societies. However, recent interest in contact zones and transcultural identities has allowed accounts of travelers to the Middle East, for a while discounted as “orientalist,” to make their way back as valuable historical sources.¹⁴ Reina Lewis’s *Rethinking Orientalism*, for example, goes further in arguing for collaborative intervention between European and Ottoman women writers who exploited orientalism’s stereotypes to their advantage.¹⁵

Medical discourse is a good springboard for understanding how premodern notions of sexuality and normative sexual conduct were propagated in the Middle East. It is also an opportunity to note the multiple influences that have channeled into the production and reproduction of knowledge in this crossroads region of the world (in the case of early medical thinking, the ancient Greek heritage). Here also is one of the few places we find sustained consideration of female sexuality, albeit articulated uniformly by men. In an overview of premodern theories of the gendered body and reproduction, Ahmad Dallal describes the implications of Galenic humoral medicine and its belief that male and female “semen” contributed equally to the formation of a fetus.¹⁶ This

view was adopted by the majority of medieval scientists, including Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037), in preference to the Aristotelian teaching that women were imperfect males who did not produce semen. (The influence of Ibn Sina and others working in Arabic on premodern European medical traditions is now well studied by European historians, for example Joan Cadden and Monica Green.)¹⁷ But Islamic scientists went beyond Greek precedents to develop a “physiology of pleasure” based on the belief that female orgasm was critical to conception. Both Dallal and Musallam before him point out that erotic literature often included medical information and was sometimes composed by doctors for lay audiences, educating them along the way on sexual disease, birth control, and the use of aphrodisiacs. The long persistence of Galenic-Islamic medical theories in the region is discussed by Mary-Jo Good in her study of provincial Iranian women’s “vocabulary of disorders of womanhood” in reaction to the contraceptive pill.¹⁸ Less studied than the medical literature, laws of ritual purity also afford perspectives on the body, sexual activity, and gender.¹⁹

Resonances of the socio-medical view of female pleasure and desire were not all as positive as its famous elaboration by the influential theologian and jurist al-Ghazālī (d.1111), whose treatise on marriage is still a manual for some Muslims today. Ghazālī prescribed an etiquette of sex that instructed men on how to pleasure women, and endorsed the legality of contraception for the preservation of female health and beauty as well as the economics of family size.²⁰ (His tract might be read as an early endorsement of the marital couple,

toward whose normativity, too often taken for granted, we should preserve a healthy skepticism.) Rather, female sexual desire was more commonly elaborated over the centuries as a justification for men's control over women, lest their inability to control their sexual appetite endanger family honor and the security of paternity.²¹ Critique of this mindset as the work of a learned male elite and as incompatible with the spirit of the Qur'ān has been voiced by several Muslim feminists, including Mernissi, as well as Leila Ahmed in her widely read *Women and Gender in Islam*. In her 1991 study of literary texts from medieval to modern times, Fedwa Malti-Douglas traces the theme of "the ever-present threat in woman's body" across several centuries and genres of literature; a notable feature of the book is its attention to the power of homosociality and its threat to the heterosexual couple.²² Here we should pause to underline the critical role of homosociality, female and male alike, in constructions of sexuality, and its intimate link to the tenacious practice of gender segregation, especially pronounced until the 20th century among wealthier trendsetting classes (a phenomenon, it should be noted, that did not prevent elite women from investing their wealth and influencing household management).

Historians have contemplated the coexistence of these divergent attitudes toward female sexuality and complementary views of masculinity in a variety of periods and contexts; what follows is merely a sample. The Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha, a political force after his death, provoked a controversial legacy studied by Denise Spellberg: an alleged sexual transgression committed

by Aisha was grist for the mill of Shiite anti-Sunni polemic. This was an early example of the potency and frequency of sexual discourse in religious as well as political controversy. Jonathan Berkey has shown how medieval jurists, sanctioning the practice of female circumcision indigenous to parts of the region yet striving to modify it, mediated the tension between fear of women's sexual desire and recognition of its positive function in marriage. Sexuality and gender figured saliently in dynastic households of the early modern era. My own study of the Ottoman imperial household explores the ways in which the dynasty controlled power by manipulating definitions of sexual maturity and thus the delegation of political authority. For Iran, Kathryn Babayan has pointed to the shifting rhythms and (re)definitions of masculinity, female authority, and patriarchy within the Safavid dynasty (1500–1722). In the realm of popular entertainment, as Dror Ze'evi notes, public performances of the popular shadow plays featured cunning female characters in control of their bodies and desires alongside males who were slaves to their passions, doubtless a satiric inversion of normative assumptions about sexual desire.²³

There has been comparatively little work on the control of male sexuality, except in the context of homoerotic sex. This is in part the result of an assumed binary in which males are sexually autonomous and dominant, while females are controlled and subordinated. Such an assumption neglects, for example, the critical factor of generational hierarchy. As I have suggested for early modern Ottoman Anatolia, life-cycle terminology ascribes little sexual ambiguity to

females, whereas male categories are imbued with sexual content: boy/son; sexually maturing adolescent, potential ideal of beauty and object of desire by older males; unmarried (randy) young men; and mature males, expected to defend the honor of their household. The unsocialized sexuality of young men who were not yet married was seen as a source of both positive and negative energy for society and for the state — they were bold soldiers and heroes, but also bandits and sexual predators whom imperial decrees repeatedly banned from danger zones such as bathhouses, where women and boys were vulnerable victims.²⁴ Organizations promoting a counter-construction of youthful manliness — valorizing bravery, generosity, and spiritual purity — pepper the social history of the Middle East. Chastity is an implied virtue here (in contrast to its explicit role as the supreme female virtue). This is perhaps the place to note that, with the exception of some Sufi groups, celibacy and the monastic life were relatively rare in Middle Eastern societies (including Jewish and Eastern Orthodox Christian communities), a reflection of respect for the sexual drive and belief in its necessary containment in marriage.

The complexities of male desire are the subject of an increasing number of studies, especially of male homoeroticism.²⁵ In a now-classic article from 1991, Everett Rowson clarified distinctions among the male penetrator of females and young males, who was not considered irregular or homosexual; the penetrated boy or youth, sometimes a prostitute, who was not stigmatized because he was expected to outgrow this role; and the passive adult recipient, whose condition

could only be considered pathological. Rowson's claim that these categories persisted until the 19th century is borne out by recent Ottoman-period studies. Kemal Silay, in his study of the 18th-century poet Nedim, was one of the first to discuss homoerotic dimensions of Ottoman poetry; he also probed the reasons for Turkish scholars' silence on the subject. Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı's depiction of "the age of beloveds," viewed through Ottoman (Turkish) lyric poetry, when young men were the pivot of desire and the inspiration for love poetry, draws numerous comparisons with European trends; the authors do their best to locate women beloveds and authors in an overwhelmingly male milieu. In his study of the sexual lives of Ottoman Jews, Yaron Ben-Naeh demonstrates that religion was no barrier to shared attitudes and practices.²⁶

This discursive celebration of male eroticism was not merely a literary conceit. Homoerotic relationships were outlawed by early modern governments and religious classes, whose job it was to uphold shari'a prohibitions of sex outside the licit heterosexual relationships of marriage and concubinage. But recent publications suggest that the social reality was more complex than a simple "normative vs. deviant." Jocelyne Dakhliya has analyzed premodern political dynamics through the lens of the often sexualized relationship between sultans and their viziers. Using Arabic writings of the early modern period, Khaled El-Rouayheb argues that a concept of homosexuality was lacking in the premodern period; rather, a range of distinctions was drawn between active vs. passive roles, (Platonic) passion for human beauty expressed in writing vs.

lust pursued, and jurists' condemnation of sodomy but tolerance of homoerotic sentiments short of sex. Andrews's study of the biography of an Ottoman judge demonstrates another pervasive dimension of sexual morality in the Middle East — excess and flaunting are what brings opprobrium; the judge's heedless and oppressive passion for the son of a soldier causes him to end up in a leper colony.²⁷

Homoerotic relations among women are less well understood, owing mainly to the relative silence of the sources. Lesbianism was occasionally taken up by male authors of medieval works on sex, who described lesbian sexual practices and speculated on why women preferred women. Female-authored perspectives are, however, exceptionally rare.²⁸ The “cultural veiling” of talented women was perhaps a disincentive to the kinds of female-authored literature we find in some other world cultures that open windows, however opaque, onto female sexual lives (whether some women deliberately confined the circulation of their writing to a female audience is difficult to know). Babayan has used late-17th-century sources, including a widow's troubled poetic account of her love for another woman, to discuss a culture of Iranian sisterhood relationships that permitted exchanges of intimacy (for example, through letters containing spices, each of which carried a particular sentiment) and possibly erotic consummation.²⁹ A topic ripe for study is widows and their presumed sexual appetites. The young Ottoman regent Turhan, for example, was accused in the 1650s of having a lesbian relationship with a female courtier, and some years later of engaging in incest with her stepson. Christian nuns, similarly distant from male guardians, might be vulnerable to accusations of lesbianism and Satanism.³⁰

It is noteworthy that the “beloveds” depicted in *belles lettres* and poetry tend to be from the artisanal and working classes, sons of grocers, ironworkers, and so forth. Literature celebrated these “city boys” — and “city girls,” too — but the writers and active subjects of such sources can be assumed to be members of more prosperous classes. Historians of the Middle East have only begun to explore class-based aspects of sexuality, particularly of the lower classes. Using court records, histories, and works of social and political commentary, Marinos Sariyannis describes an Istanbul “underworld” of overlapping layers — urban riffraff, rural migrants, coffeehouse wits, and “city boys” who mingled with their social superiors, as well as women thieves, prostitutes, and (better-off) pimps. Sariyannis rejects “marginal” as a descriptor for this underworld, despite obvious socio-sexual hierarchies, arguing that no group or profession was stigmatized or ostracized. There are critical gaps in our knowledge of the sexual lives of the poor, notably prostitution, a result, perhaps, of the legal attention focused on pimps as much as on prostitutes themselves, and the fact that prostitution was sometimes taxed and regulated and thus quasi-normalized. Elyse Semerdjian’s 2008 study of prostitutes in 17th- and 18th-century Aleppo affords an unusually detailed view of crime, punishment, and, perhaps surprisingly, redemption. Another gap is the fate of slaves used for sex and reproduction; we know the juridical discourse on slavery and a certain amount about slaves as property, but much less about the contours of slaves’ lives before the later 19th century.³¹

Legal sources generally — court records, imperial codes, fatwa collec-

tions — are relatively egalitarian in their socio-sexual landscapes (less so jurisprudential tomes) and, especially for the premodern period, can function as a bridge between literary representations of sexuality and illusive quotidian conduct. These sources have been mined more for gender than sexual histories, but recent work has explored sexual attitudes, conduct, and crime. Legal sources also illuminate the role of the state in defining normative vs. criminal sex and the resistance of local sexual regimes to hegemonic state control of sexual norms, for example the tenacious customary practices of abduction and honor killing. A potential for transnational history lies in the striking simultaneity of efforts by various early modern states to criminalize sodomy and to shore up the marital household and conjugal sex.³²

The spectrum of Middle Eastern sexualities was not limited to female and male. The biological sex binary was both undermined and reinforced by the indeterminate sexualities of transvestites, eunuchs, and hermaphrodites. What these groups shared was an association with the boundaries established by sacralized, imperialized, and/or gendered space. Everett Rowson describes the tolerance of male cross-dressers in early Muslim Arabia, who made significant contributions to Arabic music and acted as marriage brokers because of their ability to associate with women. Shaun Marmon illuminates the ways in which eunuchs guarded sacred spaces, in particular the tombs of the Prophet and the sultans of Egypt, and Kathryn Ringrose shows cognate patterns in Byzantium, where eunuchs mediated social and spiritual boundaries. Ottoman eunuchs

guarded and thus delineated royal and female spaces; in the 18th century, they acquired powerful roles in government. As Paula Sanders has shown, hermaphrodites were “normalized” by medieval jurists who found creative ways to integrate them into a society in which social relations were firmly constructed on gendered foundations. An example of juridical legerdemain was the solution to the question of who could physically examine a mature hermaphrodite with moral impunity: a female slave should be purchased to do the job.³³

Muslim mysticism was another domain that sometimes resisted the dominant norms of heterosexuality and sex as a conjugal enterprise. Early Sufi ascetics were conspicuously celibate, including the female Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, and carnal renunciation continued to have its devotees over the centuries. By late medieval times, however, the Sufi quest for union with the divine was channeled more through the metaphor of the earthly beloved than through ascetic denial. But this, too, could mean renunciation of social norms. The great 13th-century Sufi Jalal al-Din Rumi famously abandoned family and community to follow the wandering dervish Shams al-Tabrizi, his “spiritual beloved.” A homoerotic strand colors Sufism in the ubiquitous theme in Sufi poetry of the wine party and the cupbearer as beloved and in the practice of gazing at a handsome youth who served as “witness” to divine beauty. How representative this was of common practice is a question; a staple of Ottoman anti-Sufi polemic was decidedly heterosexual, accusing Sufis of immoral mixing of the sexes and even “sex orgies” in their congregational gatherings (a trope shared

with Sunni anti-Shiite discourse). Predictably, the study of female Sufis lags. Annemarie Schimmel, a prolific scholar of Sufism, asserted that it was the most egalitarian dimension of Islam, as has Leila Ahmed, but there is as yet little scholarship bearing witness to this generalization. The policing of socio-sexual boundaries associated with early modern states does, however, suggest that the more tolerant medieval period was friendlier to women mystics. To what extent female Sufis gathered in private settings is hard to know.³⁴

Anti-Sufi polemic was only one feature of conservative movements in the 17th-century Middle East that eroded toleration of social, sexual, and spiritual diversity. Yet the conservative turn was itself challenged, although countertrends were not without their own ambiguities, as recent studies of urban space and its unstable gendering suggest. Heghnar Watenpaugh contrasts the Ottoman-dominated urban center of Syrian Aleppo with the “wilderness” beyond the city limits where a charismatic Sufi sheikh deliberately engaged in sexual destabilization by addressing prominent men in the grammatical feminine and representing the spiritual relationship of master to initiate as an act of sexual penetration. Shirine Hamadeh describes the popular garden culture of 18th-century Istanbul, when older boundaries of class and gender relaxed yet anxieties did not wholly diminish: courtships flourished, women’s gatherings were depicted in paintings, yet dress codes were issued to contain the new social ebullience (attractive young Janissaries had to wear ugly veils of wicker tassels to protect them from harassment). Coffeehouses, enormously popular from the

late 16th century on, generated considerable sexual (and political) unease; in his study of drugs and stimulants in Iran, Rudi Matthee notes periodic crackdowns aimed in part at patrons seeking sex with young male cupbearers and dancers. Such crackdowns remind us of governments' habit through the centuries of issuing decrees, particularly at moments of political weakness, that limited the accessibility of spaces deemed transgressive and the mobility of (imagined) transgressors and their victims.³⁵

Two recent studies bridge the history of sexuality from premodern to modern times.³⁶ Afsaneh Najmabadi argues that transformations in thinking about gender over the course of the 19th century, and the impact of shifting sexual mores on this thinking, lie at the heart of Iranian modernity. European critique of the “vice” of homoerotic desire was a powerful stimulus to a comprehensive “heteronormalization,” among whose several manifestations were effeminization of male penetrators of other males; gendering of political loyalties, namely the masculinization of the nation, whose honor depended on protecting the female homeland; and new images of women as companionate wives and modern mothers, eroding “homosocial Iranian womanhood.” Dror Ze’evi argues that the wide variety of sexual behavior displayed by Ottoman “sexual scripts”—medical, legal, and religious discourses, dream interpretation, travelogues—was gradually silenced during the 18th and 19th centuries. The principal stimulus was a shame-inducing European disapproval of “backward” sexualities, especially homoeroticism, while a reverse critique of European

moral disarray (prostitutes roaming the streets, abandoned babies) valorized local moral rectitude. Ze'evi rightly points to the adoption of the printing press (which until the early 18th century was generally permitted only to non-Muslim communities) as a critical factor: works that earlier could circulate discreetly in manuscript were now seen as potentially corrupting of a wider public.

European critique of homoerotic sex was not new, having begun in medieval Christian anti-Muslim polemic that also castigated excessive (heterosexual) lust.³⁷ But the impact of the West on 19th-century Middle Eastern society is undeniable, whether by force of intellectual inspiration and imperialist aura or on the ground in the form of colonial administrators, missionaries, commercial agents, governesses, young Muslims returning from European educations, and so on. Indeed, the 19th- and early-20th-century history of Middle Eastern sexualities is partly a European history, especially in the colonized areas of North Africa, Egypt, and, following World War I, the Levant.³⁸ It is important to note, however, that the European impact was only one of several moral and social influences. The rise of the press in the later 19th century, including a lively women's journalism, meant that news and trends from around the world reached an expanding reading (and read-to) public. An Istanbul women's journal contemplated Japan as another modernizing traditional society and commented on the uneven progress of Japanese women.³⁹ Moreover, European and other discourses were both indigenized and inevitably overlapped by internal debates, some of historical vintage. The homegrown critique of

non-conjugal and non-heterosexual liaisons was centuries old and well rooted, particularly in religious and ethical discourses. Calls for moral rectitude issued not only from Muslims: in the 18th and 19th centuries, rabbis of the region responded to increasing complaints about same-sex relations, and in 1709 a Maronite patriarch blamed Muslim persecution of Christians on the immodest dress and scandalous conduct of Maronite women.⁴⁰ Moreover, while Islamic reform movements of the 18th and 19th centuries were not necessarily aimed at sexual moralities, they generated a dynamic of social as well as spiritual renewal and debate (liberal male proponents of women's emancipation, however, were sometimes not distinguishable from their colonial counterparts).⁴¹ In any event, women were now articulating their own concerns.

Whatever the pressures on sexual habits, sexuality as a subject of inquiry diminishes in historical scholarship on the 19th and 20th centuries, in part because of shifts of focus in sources from this period. Women's and gender history far outweighs sexual history.⁴² This is in large part the effect of women's gradual emergence from the confines of domestic space and of the erosion of taboos against writing about (and by) women and the domestic. Scholars have for the most part followed the lead of their subjects' preoccupations, for example the formation of the "modern woman" — enlightened mother, consumer, and citizen — and the conjugal couple, whose pleasures and trials were the subject of a central social and literary debate.⁴³ The exclusively (Muslim) male sphere of public action became a contested territory as women, as well as non-Mus-

lims, demanded access to political participation and debates about rights and entitlements.⁴⁴ The point here is that we can study much more activity by many more kinds of people, in part because of an explosion of sources — fiction and memoir, print culture, and expanded archives of state action, indigenous and colonial — and the new preoccupations that constituted them.

If there is a relative paucity of scholarship devoted specifically to sexuality, sexual moralities figure saliently in much work on the 19th- and early-20th-century Middle East. The movement to abolish slavery drew attention to the plight of white concubines and also raised the whole question of sexuality in marriage and the very meaning of family.⁴⁵ Nationalist imagining of the state as female and of woman as “mother of the nation,” notably in Egypt and Iran, provided (elite) women with a public platform but also visited upon them ideological domestication as objects of male protection.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the bourgeois family in its new morphology could be deployed by men to counter colonialists’ claims of native inferiority symbolized by harems, veiling, and polygyny.⁴⁷ Studies of colonial regimes’ attempts to correct sexual abuses—for example, female genital cutting and prostitution of young girls—draw our attention to ambiguous purposes and results.⁴⁸ In their efforts to modernize the great cities of the Middle East, reinvigorated governments of the 19th century, not wholly unlike colonial regimes, took on issues of physical and moral welfare—prostitution, venereal disease, sanitation—that forced the bodies of the poor and the criminal (often one and the same) to come under scrutiny. The traditional attitude of “tolerance

with limits” toward marginal groups was displaced by moralizing discourses of a distinctly class nature, verbalized by women as well as men.⁴⁹

Some current debates and developments in the Middle East that implicate sexuality have produced studies that take historical perspectives. The rise of Islamist movements since the 1970s has generated attention to the degree of doctrinal influence on sexual moralities and morphologies, but most scholarship has tended to underline a complex of local and global circumstances, trends and rivalries, and the fluid nature of sexual mores. Control of the female body and female sexuality is manifested in veiling and headscarf debates, virginity checks, and honor killing; migration has carried some of these debates abroad. Recent studies of homosexuality in the Middle East have generated lively debate, and a few brave publications in predominantly Muslim countries have taken up lesbianism. Scholarship on Iran under the Islamic Republic has illuminated intriguing developments: adaptations of the controversial practice of temporary marriage, toleration of premarital sex, and banning of prostitution and homosexuality, but toleration of sex-change surgery.⁵⁰

Some final reflections on questions of geography, texts, languages, and collaboration are in order. Boundaries are arbitrary; this essay omits Central and South Asia, which is to amputate a cultural limb, and it leaves out modern sexual histories of regions gaining independence in the 19th century that combine traces of practices shared under past multi-religious and multi-ethnic Muslim imperial regimes with new and different social trajectories. The thirty-some nation-states

occupying the pre-20th-century historical zone (the numbers keep shifting) are a measure of how diverse Middle Eastern cultural practices have always been, and scholarly coverage of the region has been uneven. As far as texts are concerned, the explosion in variety of late-19th- and 20th-century sources calls for reflection on premodern scholarship and its possible overreliance on subjects favored by elite male literary texts. Exciting new work on autobiographical writings of the 17th century is enriching perspectives on sexuality, and the neglected historical chronicles of the period are rich in sex-laden anecdote.⁵¹ The expansion of the notion of text to include graphic arts and architecture has proven revelatory for the field.

Language and language competence brings us to a more transnational-historic issue. The field of Middle East scholarship has been defined by expertise in one or more of the region's languages that are, we have been taught, best deployed in excavating sources. This can be an insularizing process from which we may need to liberate ourselves, although it has to be said that scholars of the Middle East, sensitive to neglect of the region in comparative histories, are increasingly writing with a broad audience in mind. The good news is that we can almost certainly expect, and should embrace, more transnational histories by scholars not typically identified as Middle Eastern specialists — a notable example is Natalie Zemon Davis's recent study of Hasan Al-Wazzan/Leo Africanus.⁵² In this vein, desiderata include more "internal transnational" histories that integrate ethno-religious and linguistic groups within the region, and more comparative studies with neighboring regions in Africa and Asia.⁵³

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2 In her study of the world system in the 13th and 14th centuries, Janet Abu-Lughod locates the “Middle East” zone in four (or arguably five) of eight circuits of global exchange; see the map in Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (New York, 1989), 34.

3 Julia Clancy-Smith, “The Intimate, the Familial, and the Local in Transnational Histories of Gender,” *Journal of Women’s History* 18, no. 2 (2006): 174–183.

4 Eric Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, 2006); Natalie Rothman, “Self-Fashioning in the Mediterranean Contact Zone: Giovanni Battista Salvago and His Africa Overo Barbaria (1625),” in Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *Renaissance Medievalisms* (Toronto, 2009), 123–143. Rothman terms Salgado a “trans-imperial subject.”

5 Marilyn Booth has written eloquently about the problems of doing gender, and especially sexual, histories in and on the Middle East in “New Directions in Middle East Women’s and Gender History,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 1 (2003), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v004/4.1booth.html.

6 I am grateful to Svetlana Ivanova for providing me with an account of pertinent work in Bulgarian.

7 These include the venerable *Encyclopedia of Islam* (the 3rd, online, edition is in progress), the new *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, the *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, and the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*.

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15 Reina Lewis, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (London, 2004). See also her *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London, 1996); Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature* (Durham, N.C., 2007).

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18 For the Ottoman period, see Dror Ze’evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourses in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006), chap. 1. Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good, “Of Blood and Babies: The Relationship of Popular Islamic Physiology to Fertility,” *Social Science and Medicine* 14B, no. 3 (August 1980): 147–156.

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20 Madelain Farah, ed. and trans., *Marriage and Sexuality in Islam: A Translation of al-Ghazālī's Book on the Etiquette of Marriage from the Ihyā'* (Salt Lake City, 1984).

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22 Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, Mass., 1991; originally published as *Le harem politique: Le prophète et les femmes*, 1987); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Conn., 1992). See also Asma Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, Tex., 2002). Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J., 1991).

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