Abstract: Terms of a Western discourse of homosexuality shape conflicts surrounding sexual identity that are faced by many Muslims, especially those who live in diasporic communities. Many use essentialized categories to articulate their sexual orientations and express incommensurabilities between their sexuality and their identities as Muslims. This article argues that discursive constructions of the Muslim as traditional other to the secular sexual subject of a modern democracy generate an uninhabitable subject position that sharply dichotomizes sexual orientations and Muslim family/religious orientations, a dichotomization that is reinforced by well-publicized backlashes against open homosexuality in several Muslim countries. Yet observations made during ethnographic field research in Pakistan, as well as scholarly evidence from other Muslim countries, suggest that many Muslims are less troubled by sex and desire in all their possible forms than they are by the peculiar modern practice of naming our sexualities as the basis for secular public identities.

Keywords: diasporic Muslims, homosexuality, Pakistan, secularism
between honor violence against men discovered to be homosexual and violence against women tracks the convergence of women and homosexuals as rights-bearing subjects in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) discourse. In the West, positing an equivalence between women and LGBTQs was developed as a political strategy for overcoming forms of discrimination and intolerance that made homosexuality an unlivable subject position in modern Western societies. This equivalence has given rise to the politically powerful gay rights movement as an important corrective to the criminalization and pathologization of homosexuality, which continues to be a powerful current in Western politics. But this rhetorical equivalence of women and alternative sexualities, constituting each as rights-bearing subjects, has different effects in the Muslim world, where homosexuality has not historically been pathologized in the same way.

This article juxtaposes the Western construct of the Muslim as traditional and conservative other to Muslim perspectives on sexuality as these have been manifest in local practices in Muslim societies, focusing especially on Pakistan, where I did fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s, prior to the transnational spread of the gay rights movement. I argue that many Muslims are less troubled by sex and desire in all their possible forms than they are by the peculiar modern practice of naming our sexualities as the basis for secular public identities. The dichotomizations that generate Muslim anti-gay reactions to the Western construction of the Muslim as traditional other also have the unintended consequence of creating an uninhabitable subject position for some Muslims, who are forced to choose between sharply dichotomized sexual and family/religious orientations.

The institutionalization and legalization of sexualities as identities

As Foucault (1978) has argued, “sexuality” as something that one “has” is a fairly recent invention of the medical sciences and other institutions of modern governmentality. With the articulation of “normal” subjects who fully belong to the body politic, a process particularly characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sexual deviance came to be one basis for pathologization, exclusion, and criminalization in terms of identity categories like “woman,” “prostitute,” “homosexual,” and “pedophile.” The normalization of such reified categories has emerged through a historical process that is closely imbricated with the production of modern bourgeois secular subjects out of the remnants of colonialism, not only in former colonized societies such as Pakistan, but also within the global postcolonial order that includes the West. The colonial administration of social differentiation through sexual regulation in turn played a central role in the constitution of the European bourgeois subject (McClintock 1995; Stoler 1995). Within colonial spaces, identities were racially demarcated, labeled, and hierarchized in a process of social differentiation based on essentialized categories of race, religion, tribe, and caste (Cohn 1987; Dirks 1989). These categories were reinforced and sustained through ideas of miscegenation and deviant sexualities, which became legal principles in both Europe and the colonies (see Phillips 2006: 178–79). In India, Pakistan, and other former British colonies, laws against homosexuality date back to the colonial era, justified as part of the civilizing process at a time when transnational campaigns for moral purity were at their peak. The bourgeois subject is posited as a rational agent tolerant of difference in the public sphere, yet this subject, paradoxically, emerged through the abstraction of those who were judged as not fully normal, modern, rational subjects; that is those who were sexually deviant, female, or racially inferior.

Sexual freedom and the shift from “Orient” to “Muslim world”

The imagined reaction of a Muslim to a public display of sexuality has come to be the litmus test of the (in)tolerant subject. For example,
when the Netherlands began to require a citizenship test for prospective immigrants that included watching filmed scenes of female nudity and male-male sexual contact, the ensuing media flurry included a comment by the chair of a “national Muslim organization” in the Netherlands, who was quoted as saying that Muslims must “embrace modernity.” His comment implies that it is traditional Islam that leads Muslims to reject homosexuality. This position, shared by many Europeans, locates Muslim societies as less modern, as behind their Western counterparts when it comes to the rights of homosexuals and other minorities. There is evidence of Muslim intolerance for public displays of homosexuality: in recent years there has been an introduction of new laws against homosexuality based on Islamic law in some countries, and there have also been highly publicized incidents of violence against homosexuals in several Muslim-majority countries. But the common attribution of such attitudes to the traditionalism or conservatism of Muslims is questionable.

From the vantage point of nineteenth-century Orientalist representations of the sexuality of the Muslim, today’s concern with the sexual intolerance of the Muslim immigrant is ironic. In the European colonial project, the Muslim was also a threatening other to Europe’s civilizing influence, but for the opposite reason. For many European observers, the threat came from the debauchery of Muslim men who engaged in same-sex activities (see Murray 1997; Najmabadi 2005: 26–39). A number of well-known European writers of that era traveled to places like Morocco and Egypt in search of uninhibited, same-sex sensuality (Aldrich 2003; Said 1978). Colonial explorer and officer Richard F. Burton (1885–88) characterized much of the Muslim world as being part of what he called the “sotadic zone” where, he asserted, same-sex love was more common than in most of Europe. Burton spent considerable time in Sindh (in what is now Pakistan) and wrote of his observations of phenomena such as same-sex brothels there, as part of what Richard Phillips (2006: 181) calls Burton’s “sexual geographies.”

Over the course of the twentieth century, there was a shift in the nature of the Western secular subject: it became a sexual subject free from the shackles of religion (Taylor 2007). Though Foucault downplayed the sexual revolution of the 1960s as being a continuation of the nineteenth-century intensification of a discourse of sexuality rather than a rupture with earlier forms of repression, it is this post-1960s shift that has so dramatically altered the position of the Muslim as other to the West. The exotic Orient, though still the site of furtive pleasures for sex tourists (Boone 1995), has become the “Muslim world.” During the colonial period, the Orient lagged behind the West because of its dissolute nature and libertine sexuality. Today’s Muslim world, in contrast, lags behind because it has not yet freed itself from the shackles of religion and the sexual constraints associated with tradition and Islam. Clearly, much has changed in representations of Muslims and homosexuality.

**Shadows of desire among South Asian Muslims**

Now that speaking of sexuality has become a sign of modernity in the West, there is a recent burgeoning of scholarly literature about Muslim homosexuality. It is aimed at rediscovering the historical tolerance and even idealization of same-sex desire in the Muslim world (e.g., Babayan and Najmabadi 2008; El-Rouayheb 2005; Massad 2007; Najmabadi 2005), as well as a growing anthropological literature on same-sex activities in Muslim and other societies (e.g., Boellstorff 2005; Rofel 1999; Wikan 1982). Urdu poetry from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offers considerable evidence for the idealization of same-sex love among South Asian Muslims (Naim 1979). Najmabadi (2005) has argued that the public idealization of same-sex love in art and poetry in nineteenth century Iran was disrupted or recast as heterosexual love in reaction to the powerfully critical nineteenth-century European gaze that saw homosexuality as a form of debauchery. Ethno-
graphic evidence of sexual practices in contemporary Pakistan suggests that the European colonial discourse of homosexuality was not hegemonic: it did not discipline Muslim sexualities into the European model of discrete sexual identities.

Is it still possible to identify different ways of organizing desire in postcolonial Pakistan? Although I cannot presume to escape the confines of a Western gaze, I would like to turn to a consideration of my glimpses of same-sex desire in Pakistan back in the 1970s, before the rise of the gay rights movement. What struck me most was an unexpectedly different arrangement of constraints and freedoms in the organization of desire. The constraints were not surprising, but the freedoms were not expected. This alternative way of organizing sexuality and desire can “make the familiar strange” (to repeat Geertz’s classic summation of the ethnographic project), allowing us to foreground the disciplinary constraints associated with Western forms of freedom and tolerance.

I spent nearly two years living as an ethnographer in a middle-class Lahore neighborhood in Pakistan, much of it with the family of a man who was a government servant and small businessman. This research, which I did in the mid-1970s and 1980s, focused on what I came to call “everyday arguments” surrounding the proper practice of Islam and the place of Sufi saints in the lives of these people (Ewing 1997). This was an era in anthropology when issues of gender and sexuality had not yet moved to center stage, and my research did not focus on homosexuality and its practice. I recall being confronted by my own prudery at discussing sexual practices as I listened to recently married women describe their wedding nights. This recognition of my own inhibitions was a startling experience for someone who began college in the late 1960s, no stranger to the sexual revolution and its practices. I was used to the practice but not to the talk. I learned of a startlingly different configuration of openness and censorship than I had experienced back home. For example, a young unmarried woman embarrassed me when she described in detail how a friend’s hymen had been torn when she fell off her bike. Yet she herself dissolved in embarrassment to the point of speechlessness when a young American man who was visiting me mentioned that a robin on a nearby branch looked pregnant. The key difference in the two incidents was a shift in setting, marked by the absence or presence of a member of the opposite sex. This difference sharply delineated a public realm, in which most women like herself wore either a burqa that hid the whole body and face or at least a white medical coat, from a private realm of same-sex company where women spoke openly and directly about bodily functions, including sex.

It became apparent to me that within this Muslim society, same sex desire is not unusual and is treated matter-of-factly. Over the years, as I got to know a few men better and they got used to my boundary-crossing anthropological inquisitiveness, some of them mentioned their same-sex experiences as young men before marriage. In the same-sex gatherings of young women I often participated in, the conversation sometimes grew explicitly sexual, and they shared tales of same-sex fondling under the quilts on cold, dark winter nights, sprinkled among stories of encounters with opposite-sex cousins.

In the Pakistani everyday world that gradually became familiar to me, there were males who lived nearby and whom I did not recognize when they dressed up as women to dance (in front of the women) at a family wedding, something they apparently did quite often at local weddings. These were young men who were enmeshed in their families and kinship networks and went about their everyday lives in otherwise unremarkable ways. Though I was in close contact with their families, I never heard allusions to their sexual orientations or activities, except descriptions of their dancing at weddings. Conversely, there was a young woman who lived next door and stopped by to visit the family nearly every day. I did not think much of it until one day one of the daughters in the family casually commented, “She comes over all the time because she is in love with me.”
It is a common pattern for young men to be involved in same-sex activities before marriage. These activities do not necessarily end with marriage, but neither do they necessarily create homosexual identities. Though sex outside of marriage is, according to most interpretations, forbidden within Islam, same-sex desire is seen as natural and often treated rather matter-of-factly. Desire and sexual penetration are sharply distinguished by many Muslims, but even sexual contact is not taken as a marker of a sexual identity. Take, for example, a study of AIDS transmission and condom use among Pakistani truck drivers surveyed at several Lahore truck stops (80 percent of whom were married). One survey statistic suggests that in this research setting in which men felt comfortable revealing their sexual activities outside of marriage, they also did not worry about whether they were perceived as homosexual: 49 percent of the drivers surveyed reported having had sex with a man (Agha 2002: 199). Among those with no education, the figure was even higher (55 percent), suggesting that the lack of inhibition about revealing same-sex activity was not a result of the gay rights movement, which is limited primarily to a highly educated social stratum. It is perhaps this openness that early Orientalists translated into licentiousness.

The effects of naming: Muslims, authenticity, and the gay rights movement

The movement for gay rights has been cast as a form of liberation, allowing and encouraging gays to “come out of the closet” and be publically accepted for who they “really” are. Through this medical and political discursive apparatus, which generates homosexuality as a normal sexual orientation that can serve as the basis for a normal public identity, sexuality and gender are intertwined not only with identity, but also with authenticity. Sexuality is something to be discovered by looking inward to the site of one’s true self, a process that Foucault sought to denaturalize by tracing a genealogy of modern sexuality through its discursive roots in psychiatry and the Christian confessional. This discourse constitutes the authentic individual as one whose desires are manifestations of an inner self that must be recognized. In this framework, only by coming out as publically homosexual can one live authentically, without experiencing shame because of one’s desires. The creation of a public identity turns sexuality, desire, or “orientation” into an essence that is often understood in psychological and even biological terms.

The gay rights movement has encouraged some in Muslim societies to overtly recognize that they are gay and to come out and fight for the right to openly display their sexuality, reproducing the confrontations that characterized the struggle for gay rights in the West. The preoccupation with visibility and public naming is central to the documentary film, Jihad for Love, which was released transnationally (Sharma 2008). The film was directed by Parvez Sharma, an Indian-born Muslim immigrant to the US, partially funded by openly gay former US congressman Michael Huffington, and produced by Sandi Dubowski, who had earlier made a film that traced the lives of gay Orthodox and Haredi Jews. The film is based on the director’s interviews of gay and lesbian Muslims in twelve countries. One reviewer pointed out how the film “makes an invaluable contribution by recording the names, faces, and stories of gay men and women struggling to reconcile their religion with their sexuality” (Hardy 2008). This act of recording is a key aspect of the gay rights movement: the importance of creating gays through public identification. But the film also engages Islam as a source of identity. The struggle posed in this film is the difficult tension of being both gay and Muslim, a tension that is framed as impossible to resolve when conservative Muslims maintain the power to define the relationship between homosexuality and Islam in antithetical terms. Sharma’s goal was to “take back Islam” by “lifting the veil” on Islam and homosexuality, drawing on a metaphor that has been often used to describe the feminist project to change women’s position in Muslim societies.

This kind of public recognition involves a process of naming one’s “sexuality,” by recogniz-
ing one’s desire. Such essentializations are typically a part of the very structure of “coming out” stories, as in the narrative of one young man published in an underground Pakistani gay magazine, translated from Urdu by the blogger who posted it on the Internet. The young man wrote, “It’s been almost ten years when I first realized that I am gay, it was early nineties ... but in those days many people had difficulties to understand the difference between gay and transsexuals.” The blogger prefaced the narrative with the statement: “All discourse in Pakistan is a ‘discourse of exclusion’ where minorities, perverts, insane, women, Dalits and ‘others’ have no voice at all. Among them Dalits and gays are unique because they ‘don’t exist’ in public discourse. They have been robbed of their very existence.” The implication is that those who are not publically recognized with a labeled identity that expresses this essential quality of homosexuality have been robbed of a basic human right. This process of naming is a logical extension of nineteenth-century classification techniques. Even queer theorists, such as David Halperin (2004) and Eve Sedgwick (2008), have been ambivalent about such essentialist claims, critical of the constraints and distortions involved in naming and stabilizing identities.

Miranda Kennedy (2004) unselfconsciously reproduces a series of politically charged narratives surrounding homosexuality in Pakistan with a Western secularist gaze that views Islamic discourse as barbaric and Pakistani society as oppressive and corrupt. In the process, she also reproduces Orientalism’s geographies of desire. The story ran with the byline, “In Pakistan, sex between men is strictly forbidden by law and religion. But even in the most conservative regions, it’s also embedded in society.” Kennedy begins by presenting the situation of a young man who is addicted to sex with men and now works as a prostitute because he was raped at sixteen, and then describes the harsh punishments for homosexuality in “the Islamic republic of Pakistan,” which include “whipping, imprisonment, or even death.” She then goes on to describe the secret (but usually exploitative, and often pederastic) homosexual sex practiced in tribal areas and madrassas. She contrasts this corrupt sexuality with consensual sex, which she sees emerging only in a growing community of urban elite who identify as gay. She describes the “psychological barriers” facing men who have sex with men in Pakistan: of the dozens of men interviewed for this article, almost none who admitted to having homosexual sex identified as ‘gay’ ... Most do not even believe that homosexuality should be legal.” From her perspective, the social environment needs to be transformed so that the psychological barriers to admitting one is gay disappear.

The secular spaces of tolerance for consensual gay relationships appear to offer no possibilities for Muslims who beg Allah for guidance as they struggle to reconcile a realization that they are gay with the demands of Islam and family. Young diasporic Muslims often articulate their experience of same sex desire in terms of the named identity of homosexual, and cannot reconcile this identity with either Islam or the idea of marriage as this is understood in modern middle-class circles. In contrast to the understanding of marriage that their parents or grandparents probably have, marriage is presumed to require, not just as a legally sanctioned sexual relationship that produces children, but also as a romantic complex of love, intimacy, and friendship that many people find difficult to sustain, regardless of their sexual orientation. This is a historically specific institution that socializes the individual’s romantic desire for another, subsuming it under the state. Opinions about the relationship between homosexuality and Islam are extremely polarized and highly politicized. There is a tendency for scholars, especially those in the still-immature discipline of sexuality studies, to take a liberal political stance against religious conservatism and thereby miss some of the nuances in their opposition’s perspectives. The controversial scholar Joseph Massad (2007) has argued that the social activism of gay rights organizations originating in the West has led to the increasing
intolerance of homosexuality and gays in what he calls “Arab” societies by inciting discourse that takes on a structure parallel to gay rights discourse but rigidly resistant to it. But even Mas-sad oversimplifies the views of Muslims who consider public homosexuality sinful and is too quickly dismissive of Islamic pieties. The views of at least some Islamic imams and other Muslims are not simply the negative reflection of Western gay rights discourse and may offer possibilities for framing an alternative discourse that evades current polarizations.

One conservative Internet site that attempts to help gay Muslims manage the gap between homosexuality and Islam is called “Eye on Gay Muslims.” Although highly politicized and excoriated by a number of gay rights advocates (Yossarian 2009), I find this site interesting because of its self-conscious effort to challenge the very categories of gay identity that shape the experience of homosexuality. The site identifies itself as promoting a “principled, compassionate Islamic perspective: Here we discuss the concept and emergence of ‘Gay Muslims,’ considering that homosexual activity is clearly forbidden in Islam. We kindly advise Muslims struggling with same-sex attraction, affirming that nobody is sinful for what they feel inside” (Eldin 2009). This goal seems to echo recent Christian evangelical teachings on same-sex desire. The site approaches the project of resisting gay rights discourse by recasting its premises about the modern secular subject. It also picks up an element in the Islamic tradition, which recognizes desire in any form as a natural part of human existence rather than as something that marks off certain individuals as essentially different from others.

Eldin is drawing on principles that have been articulated by a number of authorities who have shaped the Islamic tradition. For example, the well-known nineteenth-century north Indian Deobandī Ashraf Ali Thanawi, a respected Islamic leader and spiritual guide, shared with other Deobandī Islamic reformists a condemnation of same-sex sexual acts. Yet when his male disciples reported of feelings for other men, instead of condemning these feelings and making the disciple shameful of them, he would say that these feelings are involuntary (ghayr ikhtiyyari) and therefore outside of a person’s control. Thanawi is known for saying, “I would not trust myself alone in the company of a handsome young man” (Mian 2009: 4).

Conclusion

There are sharp disagreements among practic-ing Muslims themselves about the place of same-sex desire and homosexual acts within Islam and the Qur’an. There are some gay Muslims who, through a process of textual interpretation, minimize the incompatibilities. Others, including official voices in an Islamic country like Pakistan, define homosexuality in a very specific way—the act of penetration—and assert that this act is forbidden in Islam. Sexual intercourse is permissible only within marriage. Beyond that, desire per se—and even transgression—does not define the self or constitute identity. Controlling or transmuting one’s desires can be an ethical project, but in contrast to certain Christian traditions that continue to shape Western subjectivities and discourses, desire is viewed as natural, whether or not the desire is for someone of the opposite sex. In this particular Islamic model, homosexual desire is distinguished from behavior and its consequences. The idea that in order to “be oneself” one must be openly recognized as gay is, therefore, quite foreign to many Muslims. Sexual displays of any kind, and even talk about sexuality, are not appropriate in public spaces, especially when both men and women are present. Even in private spaces, there are clear rules about the display of sexuality of any sort. Yet to interpret such forms of restraint as a form of constraint rather than as a form of propriety is to define freedom quite narrowly. There is less concern with consistency across social contexts, and, therefore, less social policing (and less interior self-monitoring) for “deviance.” As my experience in Pakistan suggests, there are forms of openness in Pakistan and other Muslim societies that contrast with the supposedly natural yet
unrecognized constraints that organize everyday practices within various Western societies.

Terms of a Western discourse of homosexuality increasingly shape the conflicts faced by many Muslims, especially those who live in diasporic communities. Many clearly use categories and terms that emerge from the discourse of sexuality that developed in the nineteenth-century West. There is no single solution to the conflicts that Muslims who experience same-sex desire face. Might the sense of crisis expressed by many of these Muslims be less acute were it possible to heed the call of anti-essentializing theorists such as Elizabeth Povinelli (2007) to open an ethical shift that she hints at by suggesting that we “multiply the ways we can coordinate spirituality and sexuality—to make sex a minor form of spitting, perhaps?” Povinelli poses the project of transcending the constraints of a modern social imaginary in which the modern self has been collapsed into the “self-authorizing, self-fulfilling sexual subject” (2007: 2). Scholarship on Muslim sexualities continues to be quite politicized. Rather than railing against systems of honor or conservative Islamic imams, or criticizing the politics of LGBTQ movements, or forcing anyone to watch the sexual activities of others in a government-sponsored film in order to demonstrate one’s secularism, we need to carefully analyze the assumptions of our own discourse, including both stigmatizations of Muslim sexual practices as traditional, archaic, or inauthentic and essentializations of sexuality that often accompany sexual identity politics. This critical gaze is necessary for the recognition of new strategies being devised by Muslims who seek to overcome apparent incommensurabilities between secular sexuality and Islam.

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Notes

1. Critiquing and developing Foucault’s analysis of the objects of this sexual discourse, Ann Stoler (1995) demonstrated how the colonial order played a central role in the process of constituting the European bourgeois sexual subject, as a regime of discipline/power that Foucault’s analysis had systematically excluded or ignored.

2. In England, for example, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 criminalized “any act of gross indecency” between two males (Smith 1976: 165).


4. Among the Pathans surveyed, the percentage of men who had had sex with another man (51%) was even higher than that of men who had had sex with a woman while on the road.


6. Conversely, some gays have been upset at the queer theorist focus on resistance to mainstream normalizations: “I have a problem when gay activists and certain academics use the word in an affirming sense to describe gay people. There is certainly nothing “strange, odd or peculiar” about homosexuality, which has existed, arguably, for nearly as long as human history itself” (Kirchick 2006). This writer publically identifies as gay but lists this is one of many of his mainstream identities and activities.

7. This perspective on Pakistan provoked Talat Waseem, the press counselor of the Pakistani embassy in Washington, to respond to this arti-
cle with a published letter stating that “homo-
sexuality isn’t pervasive in Pakistan.”
8. In medieval and renaissance Europe, the pur-
pose of marriage was the procreation of chil-
dren, not the satisfaction of desire (see Burguïère
et al. 1996). South Asian arranged marriages are
not based on romantic love, but on support and
companionship that ideally develop over the
childbearing years and into old age (see Ewing
9. The site was created by Rashid Eldin (2009).

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