

INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the Study of Sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa

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Abstract: After outlining the aims of this thematic section, I introduce the articles that follow. Although they reflect different geographical interests and theoretical orientations, the articles raise some interesting issues, of which I take up two. One is the role of Islam. It appears that both Islam's historical role and its contemporary effect are critical, yet indeterminate and contestable. The other issue is comparative. There is much in common between the way sexuality is configured in Europe, on the one hand, and in the Middle East and North Africa, on the other. But there are also significant differences. I discuss some of these differences in the way sex and sexuality are culturally mobilized to construct genderedness.

Key words: Arab world, cognition, gender, Islam, metaphor, Middle East, North Africa, sexuality

Sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa is one of the most charged themes that social sciences can hope to address. The study of sexuality has been greatly implicated in the broader global politics that have engulfed the region. The eroticization of the Orient has fatefully preoccupied the Western colonial imagination as highlighted by critics of Orientalism (e.g., Said 1978). The sexuality of Arabs was no less interesting to those who struggled against European colonialism, with Franz Fanon's (1963) discussion of the erotic overtones of anti-colonial struggles springing immediately to mind. Ironically, the theoretical and methodological basis of the anti-colonial theorization of sexuality remained European—in the case of Fanon, psychoanalytic Marxist. This is ironic not only because the opponents of European domination were forced to borrow the intellectual building blocks of their opposition from Europe itself. More importantly, perhaps, the Islamic world had given rise to a

major tradition of social sciences and to a scientific discourse of sexuality that provided the basis for later European reflections on the matter. Yet by the time of the colonial expansion of Europe into the Middle East and North Africa, that tradition had become obsolescent, and sexuality was dropping out of Arab and Islamic intellectual discourses (Bouhdiba 1985; see also the articles by Dialmy and Ze'evi in this issue).

The colonial tradition of preoccupation with Arab sexuality is by no means extinct and has developed into different areas of concern. For instance, much of Israeli demography is dedicated to a near-hysterical monitoring of Arab fecundity, with the view to limiting the 'demographic threat' to Jewish supremacy in historic Palestine. This generously funded hostile preoccupation with Arab reproduction undergirds numerous academic careers, and has spawned such policy recommendations as the compulsory incarceration of Bedouin men who sire more than 10 children (Rakhlevski 2005).

Notwithstanding the silence of Arab and Islamic intellectual discourses over sexuality, the significance attached to sexuality in Western scholarship of the Middle East and North Africa reflects more than the phallogocentric preoccupation of European scholarship and colonialist governance. It is also a major issue in Arab sociality.

For instance, the deceptively idyllic Galilean village of Mghar erupted into communal strife in February 2005. Tensions between Druze and Christians exploded when a Druze youth spread rumors that Christians in the village had posted nude pictures of Druze girls to the Internet. Such an affront to Druze honor cried out, so it seemed, for revenge. There ensued an attack in the village by the Druze against the Christians, in which houses and businesses were burned, and many of the Christians had to flee the village altogether. Unable to resist the historical parallels, the Israeli media described the events as a pogrom. The situation was aggravated by the power disparity between the two communities. The Druze are the only Palestinian Arab community to collaborate as a community with the Zionist regime. They are over-represented in security forces and have great access to arms, munitions, and military training. Indeed, government-issued weapons were used during the riots, and Druze regular and reserve troops took part in the violence. The rumors about the postings to the Internet were subsequently found to have been false. Even though some attempts at a rapprochement were made, many Christians continue to be reluctant to risk a return to their homes in the village.

The linkage of sex with honor throughout the Middle East and North Africa turns sexuality into a potentially explosive sphere that can be dragged into, and can seriously aggravate, any simmering social tension. As a social sphere in their own right, sexual practices in the Arab and Islamic worlds have also emerged as one critical arena in which social and ideological conflicts are played out. The politicization of the veil is a case in point. No less significant have been aspects of the presentation of the male sexual self in everyday life, such as the beard, although masculine practices and aesthetics are nowhere near as politicized and contentious as those that are linked to women (see Najmabadi's article in this volume).

The stakes in the political struggles over sexuality are high. At question is the very nature of Islam and its social role. Radical Arab feminists, such as physician and author Nawal El Saadawi, couch their demands for the sexual emancipation of the Arab woman in secular terms. Their secularism, coupled with their Western ideological and political orientations, have been perceived by some Islamist circles as a major threat to Islam. For their part, Islamic fundamentalist movements, which have been waxing and waning over the past few centuries, have also turned sexual conduct in general, and the seclusion of women in particular, into a paramount cause. While they may present their agenda as a retreat from a sorry present to a righteous past, their images and future designs are no less radical and unprecedented than those of the most radical of Arab feminists.

The struggles are fierce and often violent. Caught up between secular radicalism and reactionary fundamentalism, most people just go with the flow. And it is within this flow that historic processes take shape, such as the phoenix-like return to prominence of the veil.

The Thematic Issue

Notwithstanding the problematic nature of the topic—or rather, precisely because of it—we at *Social Analysis* decided to confront head on the issue of sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa with this thematic section. In launching ourselves into the project we had several aims in mind.

First, we wished to focus narrowly on sexuality rather than more broadly on gender. Moreover, we were determined to include studies of corporeal practices, not just analyses of cultural constructions. In keeping with the aims of *Social Analysis*, we also hoped to draw on various disciplines and different scholastic traditions. We especially strove to include studies from the region itself by scholars of the region. Ideally, this should have served to help reset the agenda of research in sexuality. This agenda is currently dictated by preoccupations, aesthetics, and interests that emanate from European metropolitan and settler societies that dominate the international academic scene. Without prejudicing the outcome, we intended to allow alternative agendas to emerge from the articles we would select. Ultimately, we hoped that an exploration of sexuality in a distinct, non-Western area might serve as a comparative backdrop to tease out the epistemological doxa—all those concepts and questions that are taken for granted—in the contemporary scholastic engagement with sexuality.

The task proved much more ambitious than originally expected. In attempting to get the message out to the community of scholars, several sobering facts emerged very quickly. One is that even today, even in the heartland of modernity, we do not have a truly cosmopolitan academy. Accessing the Anglophone academic world was pretty straightforward, but getting through to other academic spheres proved a major challenge. Calls for articles that were circulated through major English-language channels suffered poor visibility in francophone and Hispanic academic circles, for example. When it came to

scholars from the region itself, the situation became even more complex. Social sciences in Iran and the Arab world continue to be in dire straits, affected by a lack of academic freedom and of funding, and often operating in an atmosphere of terror. While the situation is highly variable throughout the region, it is nowhere close to ideal.

In addition to the general difficulty of social research in the region, sexuality imposes its own set of complications. The topic is sensitive in the Middle East and North Africa, both morally and, as emerges clearly from Dialmy's article, politically. The silence of intellectual discourse in the Middle East on affairs of sex is a major reason we cannot expect, at this stage at least, an epistemological alterity to emerge from Middle Eastern and North African research into sexuality. Quite the contrary. A major component of the academic engagement with sexuality within the region is the adaptation of European epistemology to the issue at hand. The neologizing that Dialmy was forced to engage in is typical. In fairness, though, it would be wrong to conceive of European epistemology as essentially foreign to a putative Middle Eastern and North African epistemology. The philosophical bases of modern European thought, including social sciences, have been to a large extent derived from Arab and Islamic scholarship. This might help account for the fact that European epistemology lends itself to adaptation by Middle Eastern and North African scholars to the reality of their region.

The Articles

Be that as it may, the gamble of the thematic section proved well worth taking, and we were able to select four outstanding articles, covering different areas and offering different perspectives on our chosen theme. Taken together, they testify not only to the variability of the phenomena under consideration, but also to the multiplicity of scholarly vantage points on these phenomena.

Abdessamad Dialmy's article offers a panoramic view, as it were, of social research into sexuality in the region. His choice of themes is a good indication of the main agenda that an indigenous science of sexuality might follow in the Middle East and North Africa. This agenda, for example, emphasizes the influence of the sexuality of the West and the link between honor and sexuality, and is more concerned with the policing of the sexual majority than is European research into sexuality. By contrast, European sex research is concerned with sexual minorities and with politically marginalized sexual practices to a much greater extent than Middle Eastern scholarship. This difference is part and parcel of the broader difference in the political economy of sexuality in the two cultural spheres.

Dror Ze'evi's article takes up the theme of the disappearance of sex from public discourse in the late Ottoman empire. He traces these discursive changes in specific areas of public discourse in order to put this disappearance in the context of internal transformations and the cultural and political encroachment by Europe. He thereby shows how the historical process of sexual modernity, and modernity in general, is qualitatively different in the Middle East from its

European counterpart. Whereas in Europe social transformations were accompanied by novel discourses on sexuality, in the Middle East and North Africa old discourses were not replaced but rather collapsed and were effaced under the pressure of new imported sexual paradigms.

With Afsaneh Najmabadi's article we move farther east, to Iran, while covering a similar period to Ze'evi's. By looking at the transformation of sexualized aesthetics, Najmabadi is able to subject the personal—what people find sexually attractive—to a fully historical analysis. Here, too, new sexual paradigms imported from the West supplant existing paradigms. Iran sexual modernization brought about the feminization of beauty and what Najmabadi calls the hetero-normalization of love. Thus, the erstwhile eroticized gaze that was directed at pretty boys gave way to the virtually exclusive eroticization of women, whose appearance has come to be managed according to European standards of attractive femininity.

In both Ze'evi's and Najmabadi's articles the broad historical processes of colonialism and modernity are implicated in the focused analysis of sexuality. But the nuanced analysis shows how indeterminate such historical processes are, as well as how pervasive their influence is. Both authors' focus on sexuality, including aesthetics and popular culture, allows us to appreciate the profundity of how the broad abstract processes such as modernity and colonialism are manifest in practice in the daily lives of people and internalized into their very subjectivities in the form of aesthetics and dispositions.

In a provocative article, Colette Harris takes us to central Asia, to Tajikistan, where Islamic and Russian influences make for a dynamic social and cultural hybridity. Her article deals with actual sexual practices and styles. Writing from the perspective of a clinician and practitioner, she sets out to account for a systemic difference in heterosexuality between Europe and the Islamic region. She describes two ideal types, as it were, or two modalities of sexuality. One is a sexual attraction that is attached to a particular object. The other is a generalized sexual arousal that is independent of a particular object. The former she associates with European and Russian culture, the latter with Tajik Islamic ways. In Tajikistan she sees a cultural clash between these sexual styles, a clash that overlaps with other social cleavages such as the generational gap.

Taken together, these articles raise many interesting themes. Here I will seek to address two. One is the role of Islam in the explanation of sexual behavior. The other is the extent of the difference between Middle Eastern and North African sexuality, on the one hand, and its European equivalent, on the other.

The Role of Islam

Islam is ubiquitous in the Middle East and North Africa, inflecting all aspects of life of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. There is a consensus among writers on sexuality in the region that Islam is a critical factor in understanding sexual behavior. But the exact significance of Islam is harder to pin down.

Historians, especially feminists, have for a long time debated the significance of the advent of Islam for the evolution of the gender order in the Islamic world. Some see it as buttressing the position of women, for instance, by banning pre-Islamic practices of female infanticide and securing inheritance rights for women. Others, who take a dim view of Islam's effect on the status of women, emphasize the extent to which Islamic law has limited many of the rights and spheres of activity that women had enjoyed in pre-Islamic Arabia. The banning of polyandry while retaining polygyny is a case in point, as is, more generally, the seclusion of women. A third approach sees the Islamic gender order as an accommodation to and incorporation of the existing gender order in Mesopotamia at the time of the establishment of the Islamic empire. The advent of Islam had a negligible effect on sexual norms and practices according to the stronger versions of this latter approach (Tucker 1993).

While the individualistic radical impetus of early Islam clearly emphasized the equal humanity of different categories of humans, including men and women, it would appear that the evolution of Islamic jurisprudence has served to blunt the radical edge of early Islam, at least as far as sexuality and gender are concerned. Hence, there is a tendency among secular Muslim historians of sex and gender to see the history of Islam as a story of declension from a relatively healthy and uninhibited beginning, down toward repression and suppression, hitting rock bottom with foreign colonialist and imperialist domination (Bouhdiba 1985).

Whether Islam adopted pre-existing Mesopotamian practices or developed its own new ones, the fact remains that the sexual sensibilities of the region are by no means confined to Muslims. The association of female virginity and honor, for instance, cuts across communal and religious boundaries, as demonstrated by recent events in Palestine. In May 2005, a Christian man in Ramallah beat his daughter to death after she refused to terminate a socially compromising liaison with a Muslim man she was determined to marry. In the weeks leading up to the murder, the young woman, Faten Habash, tried unsuccessfully to elope and had been subjected to severe beatings by her relatives. Following the killing, the father was charged, convicted, and sentenced to a mere six months in jail, based on the Jordanian legal code, adopted by the Palestinian Authority, which includes a clause that secures special and favorable consideration for perpetrators of honor crimes.

The murder and the lightness of sentence angered human-rights activists and women's advocacy groups in Ramallah, who organized some demonstrations in protest against this particular murder and its judicial treatment, and more generally against honor crimes and the way they are dealt with by the judicial and legislative systems. But these organizations are clearly facing an uphill battle.

A Palestinian Christian in her fifties who knew the slain young woman complained bitterly to me about her own mother, who thought the father was fully within his rights to kill his daughter. Moreover, she recounted that in a discussion following the event with approximately 40 young women at the Young Women's Christian Association in Ramallah, where Faten Habash had been a

student, over 30 girls also thought the father's conduct was legitimate and that Faten Habash had brought it upon herself.

This instance demonstrates that the association of sexuality with family honor is not an exclusively Muslim issue. Moreover, we see here that this association is not a male project directed against women. Rather, the reproduction and maintenance of the gender regime and sexual order are a collective project of both men and women.

In the same month that this drama was taking place in Ramallah, honor crimes were committed elsewhere in Palestine. In Jabil Mukabbir, an Arab village in East Jerusalem, a Muslim man killed two of his sisters and injured a third in an honor crime whose exact circumstances were not fully clarified in the media. The killer's parents (who are the victims' parents too) were also involved in the killing.

In the very same month that the women were killed in Ramallah and Jabil Mukabbir, a different saga was reaching its climax in the Jewish sector. The daughter of Israel's Chief Sephardi Rabbi, Shlomo Ammar, had developed an Internet relationship with a religious young man, a friendship that did not meet with her parents' approval. The latter thought it inappropriate for a woman to have a personal relationship with a man who was not a relative. The Chief Rabbi's son and two accomplices abducted the young man for a few days; beat him up on several occasions at numerous locations, including the Chief Rabbi's own home; and threatened him with a worse fate if the relationship continued. The abduction and torture were subsequently reported to the authorities and referred for prosecution.

The last instance and the above-mentioned Mghar riots, which were motivated by rumors concerning the Internet, highlight the implications of technology in the negotiations of the gender order. Cyberspace affords a convenient meeting place for those who may not meet in physical space. Also, it is a new public space that is little understood and lends itself to fear and hysteria, as demonstrated by the rumors spread in Mghar. Moreover, these two instances along with the murders in Ramallah and Jabil Mukabbir demonstrate the ubiquity of the threat female sexuality poses to collective honor across Middle Eastern and North African communities, be they Muslim, Christian, Jewish, or Druze.

It is by no means straightforward, then, to associate the traditional Arab sexual values with Islam. These values are shared among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Moreover, the place of these values within Islam remains a moot point. Determining which practices of Muslims are essential to Islam is one of the stakes in the political struggles within Islam. And indeed, it is by posing such questions that some seek to mobilize Islam against traditional Arab sexual practices. For instance, among Palestinians inside Israel, a Muslim women's group called Women and Horizons is holding courses and promoting a feminist Islamic perspective. Here, Islam and its sacred texts are mobilized for the defense and promotion of women's rights, and common patriarchal practices are reinterpreted as unsanctioned by Islam (Saar 2005).

While the exact role to be played by Islam in reproducing and changing the gender order remains indeterminate, it is a safe bet that Islam will continue

to be critical for the configuration of sexuality in the Middle East. Islam is the most powerful cultural vehicle in the region, and whoever can get his or her message carried by Islam will stand to achieve a measure of social and cultural ascendancy, but at a cost. As one of the secular members of Women and Horizons explained:

In our society, religion is a major, influential factor. We are not a religious organization. We are social, and we wish to act for social change through the religious texts. I want to use the religion and the maneuverability it gives us in order to change things in society for the benefit of women.

I am aware of the glass ceiling of religion. But we don't want to import Western feminism. We have the local context, in which religion is given a central place. We cannot and do not want to disregard it. As a secular Muslim, I am also influenced by the religion. We want to give new horizons to women together with the religion, not against it. We are dealing with a masculine taboo. We don't argue with the ceiling—the challenge is to stretch the space between the floor and the ceiling. (Saar 2005)

Obviously, the exact role of Islam has been and will continue to be highly contested. At stake is nothing less than the fate of Islam as a religion, as a culture, and as a civilization.

Alterity, Similarity, and Cross-Cultural Comparisons

In addition to the issue of Islam, the other major point that this collection of essays raises is the question of alterity. Clearly, there is a difference in sexual discourses and practices between Western and Northern Europe and its settlements, on the one hand, and the Middle East and North Africa, on the other. Travelers who cross between the two spheres know it firsthand, and scholars have recast it in academic terms. But could it be that this difference masks an underlying commonality of sorts?

In his analysis of masculine domination, Bourdieu (2001) addressed what he saw as a Mediterranean sexual subconsciousness that undergirds sexual behavior in such diverse contexts as Algerian Berber villages and urban France. Indeed, while articulated differently, the underlying construction of sexuality in the two cultural spheres betrays a common logic. Sex as danger, the differential significance of virginity for males and females, the objectification of the female body—all are common themes throughout Mediterranean societies.

These commonalities are probably implicated in some of the cultural exchanges between Occident and Orient. For instance, the cultural influences that have transformed the erotic representation of women in Iran were possible, as Najmabadi shows, precisely because in both Europe and Iran women's bodies were objects of an eroticized masculinist gaze. Such profound commonalities underlie many seeming differences between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. For example, whereas veils and beauty pageants may appear as diametrically opposed phenomena, the difference is rather superficial. Both

respond to a similar objectifying valuation of the female body. One approach seeks to limit the potential effect of this power, the other seeks to manipulate it. The two share an important underlying sexual aesthetic that pervades the Middle East and North Africa as well as metropolitan and settler European societies.

The shared objectification of the sexualized female body—unlike the maternal body, which in European societies is constructed and experienced as a subject (Uhlmann and Uhlmann 2005)—might help explain why the liberal discourse of sexual rights may find it hard to take root in the Middle East and North Africa, while other more dominant Western discourses migrate with great ease to the public sphere in these regions. The projection of commodified and objectified sexuality, which is the basis of the success of many pop starlets in the US and Europe, has been reproduced in much of the contemporary entertainment in the Middle East and North Africa. Local Arabic-language satellite television stations, which have become immensely popular in the Arab world, project into the homes of many viewers the images of heavily made-up, scantily clad young female singers, whose highly sexualized stage presence more than makes up for what they lack in vocal skills. The objectified sexualization of female singers stands in contrast to the more respectable presentation of male singers in the very same media outlets.

Moreover, sometimes the sense of radical difference that Westerners encounter in the Middle East is due to ignorance or amnesia about European practices. For instance, clitoridectomy—practiced in very limited parts of the Middle East—was a common procedure in nineteenth-century Europe that many women sought for themselves in order to be cured of that dangerous affliction of masturbation and, more generally, of uncontrollable sexual desires.

Similarly, the following comment in Harris's article has a distinct air of *déjà vu* about it: "I even heard of a young Tajik man in love with a divorced woman who allowed his parents to marry him to a virgin. He divorced her and then married his friend, all just to be able to conform to the norms." This story is rather reminiscent of the recent shenanigans of the House of Windsor, a definite specimen of European culture.

These similarities might lead one to wonder to what extent the difference Harris describes between desire and 'horniness' is a difference between a European style and an Islamic style, respectively, or whether both sexual styles co-exist in both societies, and the difference lies rather in the balance between them.

Recasting Bourdieu's contention in David Schneider's terms (e.g., Schneider 1980: 1–8), we might therefore think of the differences between sexuality in the two cultural spheres as being, to a large extent, differences in a normative superstructure that is constructed over similar cultural infrastructures. But this position can also be taken too far. Even though contemporary social research into sexuality in the Middle East is still in its infancy, it might already be possible to identify some systemic differences between European and Islamic societies in the way sexuality is culturally deployed, as it were, to shape the sexed and gendered experiences of social agents. This, at least, is what seems to emerge from the articles in this collection.

In order to explain this point, a momentary digression from the topic of sexuality is in order. One of the observations of scholars of cognition has been that humans tend to use concrete constructions and paradigms to structure abstract domains of experience. For instance, the up:down dichotomy designates a concrete pre-conceptual experience of bodies in three-dimensional space. This dichotomy lends itself to construct more abstract domains of experience (Johnson 1987), such as social hierarchies or structures of authority within organizations. While it is true that the concepts of up and down are fully cultural constructs, their referent is a rich, concrete, corporeal, and immediate experience. This is the reason why this dichotomy lends itself so effectively to construct the more abstract and disembodied domain of social or organizational hierarchies.

Sex and reproduction, too, are anchored by rich, concrete, corporeal, and immediate experiences. These experiences make the constructions of sex and reproduction rather effective sources for the subsequent construction of abstract domains such as gender and sexuality.

In European society, the cultural construction of reproduction—sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and parturition—serves as an organizing metaphor that structures both kinship and gender (Yanagisako and Collier 1987). In other words, an idealized notion of the process of reproduction serves to structure the gender relations within a proto-typical family, which in turn serves to structure genderedness in more abstract contexts. For instance, the association of women with the domestic domain is rationalized through their internalized role as caregivers, in juxtaposition with the masculine role as breadwinner. This association is internalized into the subjectivity of social agents and is manifest in tastes, dispositions, and bodily hexes, so that women and men end up gravitating, seemingly spontaneously, to their culturally prescribed roles (Uhlmann 2000; Uhlmann and Uhlmann 2005).

By contrast, the seclusion of women and their attachment to the domestic domain in the Middle East and North Africa are more directly linked to the differential sexual functioning of men and women, especially as organized around the act of penetration. Seclusion is often experienced as a necessary restriction born out of the dangers of sex—experienced as a ubiquitous, dangerous social energy. The consequences of sex are potentially devastating for women in particular and for their families more generally. It is for this reason that women are secluded and that their sexual drive is policed as closely as possible, a mission in which women themselves act as the primary policing agents of their own sexuality.

There is here a fundamental difference between the logic of European gender differences and the logic of Middle Eastern and North African gender differentiation. In European societies, the different trajectories of men and women are ascribed to inherent differences in dispositions between the genders, differences that are most deeply manifest in the dispositions, aesthetics, and preferences of people. It is these differences in essence that lead to the differentiation of genders. Moreover, these differences are much broader than sexual functioning. By contrast, in the Middle East and North Africa there is a lesser emphasis

on such putatively congenital differences. The issue in the latter region is not the expression of the gendered essence but rather the moral policing of sex. And it is this policing, an integral aspect of which is education and upbringing, that produces the differences between the genders. In other words, if in European societies differences in the essence of men and women produce the social differentiation, then in the Middle East and North Africa it is rather the enforcement of the differentiation that produces the differences between men and women. And the differentiation in this region is very closely connected to sex in the narrow sense.

In the Middle East and North Africa, then, both men and women can get 'horny', to use Harris's typology, and if they do, both might be subject to insatiable and uncontrollable sexual drives. The libido of men and women is essentially the same. Hence, the great social threat of open sexuality. Hence, too, the great need to police it, especially in women. That is why the Tajik men that Harris describes do their utmost to ensure that their Muslim wives are not sexually excited, and that is also the logic of the Moroccan adage cited by Dialmy: "She moves, she is divorced." The rationale is that if a woman were to be allowed to experience sexual pleasure, she would develop an uncontrollable sexual drive, a drive similar to that experienced by men and which Harris glosses as 'horniness'. It is precisely because the sexual drive of men and women is essentially the same, yet the consequences so different, that women's bodies and selves need to be closely monitored and tamed. This equivalence of male and female libido can be contrasted with European articulations of libido. Among white, working-class Australians, for example, a narrow male interest in sexual intercourse is juxtaposed with a broader female interest in relationships and emotions (Uhlmann 2000).

The Middle Eastern and North African equivalence between male and female sexuality has a distinct pre-modern tone to it, as emerges, for instance, from Ze'evi's mobilization of Thomas Lacquere's work to account for some past Islamic discourses on sexuality. This begs the question of whether the contrasts that are drawn here should be couched as a comparison between the Middle East and North Africa, on the one hand, and Europe, on the other, or whether we are rather comparing a European modernity with a trans-Mediterranean non-modernity (for want of a better word). This question will not be taken up here.

The difference between the narrower sexual metaphor that prevails in Middle Eastern and North African constructions and the broader reproductive metaphor in Europe has implications for the very construction of patriarchy and masculine privilege. Judging from the articles in this collection, it would appear that in the Middle East and North Africa, sexual intercourse—and the act of penetration at that—is much more salient in the cultural idioms and metaphors that are used to evaluate the two genders. As Dialmy shows, the distinction between the penetrating and the penetrated, or the sexual active and the sexual passive, is fundamental to the construction of sexual domination. Woman is one of the passives.

This contrasts with the construction of masculine domination in the West. In the different spheres of domination, the principal idiom of domination is

not penetration but an infantilization of the dominated. Thus, the man:woman dichotomy is modeled after the adult:infant dichotomy in the general domain, where man is dominant, although this infantilization is reversed in the domestic sphere, where woman is dominant (Uhlmann 2000). For example, the way Australian women make themselves up and manage their bodily appearance strongly accentuates baby-like features (see Fergie 1988).

This alluring interplay between similitude and alterity further complicates the comparative study of sexuality in European societies, on the one hand, and in Middle Eastern and North African societies, on the other. Not quite different, yet not quite the same, one must always be on one's guard to ensure that one does not inappropriately project from one's own background onto the society one studies. But it is this interplay that ultimately forces the study of one society to be, inevitably, the study of the other society, too. European reflections on Arab and Muslim sexuality will, by necessity, force a sharpened understanding of European practices, just as Arabs and Muslims have been forced to rethink their own sexuality in the wake of the global proliferation and dominance of European practices and aesthetics.

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