In this article I survey several themes in Middle East and North Africa gender-related studies that have emerged as important for me as a student, teacher, and researcher: the operations and fracturing of binary frameworks (e.g., West/East, authentic/inauthentic, modern/traditional, resistance/abjection, secular/pious); varying perspectives on gendered selves, subjectivities, and identities, and their implications for feminist imaginings and sexuality; and challenges to reductive, ahistorical, static, and decontextualized engagements with “culture” and “religion.” My article focuses on sources written in English and dealing largely with the twentieth century and contemporary period. This is by no means an exhaustive survey of Middle East and North Africa-related gender research, but rather an invitation to enter the literature through a distinct analytical lens.

My critiques and orientations are informed by my Arab American feminist subjectivity; interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary U.S. academic training and teaching; and training, research, fieldwork, and teaching in Middle East and Arab studies. I occupy an “international social science” position in the Gender and Women’s Studies Program at Oberlin College. Given the small size of our program and our pedagogical goals, however,
my one full-time colleague and I have found it necessary to teach gender and sexuality by using analytical categories that cross national, group, and cultural boundaries; assign material from a range of disciplines and inter-disciplines; and address a range of histories and experiences. In this manner, we challenge dominant conceptions of the “international” by fracturing every nation; situate the U.S. nation within a transnational grid rather than outside of it; and undermine the social science/humanities polarity.

My experience at these interstices has produced specific concerns. For example, the silences and unarticulated assumptions in many U.S.-focused feminist discussions of subjectivity, including the centrality of U.S. histories, experiences, and locations in understanding the operations of gender and sexuality, have spurred my analysis of gendered subjectivities in relation to Middle East and North Africa. This positioning has at the same time destabilized “Middle East and North Africa” as a category about which certain understandings can be taken for granted with respect to subjectivity, gender, sexuality, and culture.

Research by definition is selective and the truths we find are sometimes illegible when read outside relevant histories, and the material and political context of their production and reading. For example, understanding twentieth-century and contemporary “modernist” and “traditionalist” projects within and in relation to the Middle East and North Africa requires excavating the applicable (colonial, neoliberal, imperial, and indigenous) relations of domination—but these relations will be to various degrees visible or relevant to differently situated researchers and readers. The materialities of knowledge production are relevant in other ways. The subject of “sexuality” in Middle East and North Africa, for example, is less likely to be supported by funding organizations than the less sensitive issues of family, population, or health. Further barriers to this area of research are the difficulties of acquiring state permission and the political, economic, and cultural interests of the U.S. and European states and foundations usually providing the funding. It is difficult, however, for Middle East and North Africa states to limit knowledge production in relation to media discourses, political discourses, religious texts, laws, published reports, novels, or television material. The consequences in terms of published work on sexualities in Middle East and North Africa is that research—
which can be quite sophisticated—is largely based on analysis and critique of religious and juridical texts. Less frequent but also important is analysis of local literatures and popular culture in relation to these questions.

Both Middle East and North Africa-based and visiting scholars are affected by the research conditions in states where power depends on repressing critical discourses and limiting access to archives and people. Although non-Middle East and North Africa-based scholars working in the region must contend with subjects' concerns about the intent of the research, they do not face threats to their funding and job security based on their findings. In contrast, researchers from the region are often limited by research funding that has strings attached by the state of citizenship, and they can be imprisoned or fired at the behest of the state for violating broad laws against insulting religion or state leaders (e.g., in Jordan, Egypt, and U.S.-occupied Iraq).

Additional material factors structuring feminist knowledge production focused on Middle East and North Africa include differential teaching loads, language knowledge, and access to research funding and published material, and time to read, travel, translate, and conduct field and archival research. The unequal labor conditions of scholars in differently resourced institutions transgress the East/West binary because there are better and worse situated academics and institutions within and across national borders. Also transgressing this binary are the activist-academic tensions so familiar to U.S. feminisms. Such tensions can be productive because for academics, contentious interactions with activists challenge the inherently conservative influences of institutionalization, such as abstraction and the hegemony of what Susan Buck-Morss calls "theory-world." Such conflicts can also complicate the discursive, organizational, and strategic social change frameworks of activists and practitioners, as well as clarify repressive or ineffective aspects of such projects.

Not acknowledging multiple and coexisting conditions among differently situated (ideologically, historically, and materially) researchers too often leads to fruitless debates among scholars within Middle East and North Africa gender studies—especially online and in conferences and newsletters—that occur under the radar of published scholarly material. These polarizing discussions easily lend themselves to in/authenticity or
in/outside framings (e.g., Western/Eastern, secular/religious) that inhibit more sophisticated scholarly debates in which we explicitly address and critique each other’s work in the contexts of its production and reading.

The first section of this article discusses the deployments of and challenges to “modernity” and “tradition” as discursive constructs within Middle East and North Africa gender studies and the manner in which they remain imbricated in histories of subordination and inequality. The second section addresses engagements with agency, subjectivity, and identity in Middle East and North Africa-related gender scholarship. The third section argues for more attention to the plural and often contradictory nature of gendered imaginings, locations, and projects in Middle East and North Africa. The fourth section discusses methodological and theoretical engagements with sexualities in Middle East and North Africa-related scholarship and points to elisions, absences, and guiding assumptions. The final section highlights some limitations of treating Middle East and North Africa as a bounded category, arguing for fracturing that allows for more within state, within region, and transnational analyses.

MODERNITY AND TRADITION
Feminist scholars of Middle East and North Africa have explored the extent to which local gender politics and feminist projects have been inextricable from colonial, postcolonial, imperial, and/or neo-imperial relations. More specifically, many have shown how these systems of subordination continue to produce modernist and traditionalist responses at the heart of which are issues of women’s status and gender. Such studies challenge previously dominant understandings of the abjected Muslim or Arab woman, situated out of class and out of history, subjected to unchanging traditions in bounded and contained contexts. Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, for example, demonstrated how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British colonial discourse, Egyptian anticolonial male elite (“new men”) responses, and class tensions within Egypt dialectically constructed Egyptian women’s status (symbolized most dramatically by the veil) as a marker of cultural inferiority or superiority in relation to Europe, so that Egyptian liberation from colonialism came to be linked to “modernizing” Egyptian
women for some elites. Af Sneh Najmabadi has shown in a range of publica-
tions that from the late nineteenth century, Iranian cultural politics have made strikingly similar connections between modernity/backward-
ness and women's sartorial practices and status, placing the woman ques-
tion at the core of national progress and morality discourses.

As demonstrated in Nadje al-Ali's Secularism, Gender, and the State in the
Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement, a framework of East versus West
continues to structure and delimit regional feminist projects of many
varieties, which must contend with, on the one hand, U.S. neo-imperial
projects garbed in the modernity of neoliberal democracy, and on the
other, the traditionalist responses of nationalist or Islamist elites intent on
regaining or attaining masculine privilege within Middle East and North
Africa societies. Within such a framework, feminism is imbricated in colo-
nialism, imperialism, or Western capitalist hegemony, with one side arguing
for it and the other resisting it with authenticist vigor.

Indeed, contemporary struggles within and transgressing Middle East
and North Africa boundaries, even those that posit themselves as tradi-
tional, often appear to be searches for alternative or oppositional moderni-
ties in which the woman question is central. Importantly, such construc-
tions often assume a nonexistent unitary Western form of modernity.

Charles Taylor has argued that all modernities are produced in cultural
and situated contexts. Lisa Rofel's comparison of three generations of
Chinese women silk factory workers treats modernities as "local imagin-
aries," always articulated in relation to local and global contexts. Similarly,
Aihwa Ong's work on capitalist enterprises and cultures in China and
other East Asian countries has called for scholarly recognition of plural
modernities, as well as decentering the North American and Eurocentric
standards against which such projects are measured. Indeed, Deniz
Kandiyotl contends that critical feminist research on modernity and gen-
der in Middle East and North Africa continues to be marked by omissions
and silences regarding the extent to which indigenous modernity dis-
courses (and their straditionalist responses) exist(ed) not only in relation
to the West, but in response to local political histories, and ethnic, class,
and other inequalities and differences. Acknowledging the existence of
plural modernities, whose points of "origin" are multiple and impure,
Frances S. Hasso

opens up possibilities for recognizing plural feminist projects and subjectivities that may include nonsecular articulations, as indicated in Ziba Mir-Hosseini’s work, or even antifeminist subjectivities and agencies that value certain forms of self-subordination, an issue to which this article returns.¹

Feminist scholarship on Middle East and North Africa has critiqued the positing of modernity and tradition as oppositional and attended to the often violent and repressive aspects of projects framed as either. Although a project styled as modernist or traditionalist can have emancipatory aspects (depending on the complicated ways one is constituted in relation to it), both types are premised on disciplinary regimes. In that sense, the distinction between such discursive categories is difficult to sustain, and it becomes more interesting to explore the workings and impact of specific projects. For example, modernist (no less than traditionalist) projects, including the secular or secularizing state, violate women’s bodies and regulate their sexual behavior. Scholars have addressed modernist projects in Middle East and North Africa as double-edged, with emancipatory and regulatory aspects, and similar to many traditionalist projects often premised on and constitutive of gender inequality.²

These perspectives are more likely to address modernist projects, including secular modernity, as repressive of plural identities and locations, in comparison to still hegemonic feminist assumptions that secular modernities are more likely to serve women’s interests. For example, Valentine Moghadam perhaps too categorically argues that secular political systems are significantly better for women than religion-based systems. Although this may be empirically true in the tortured history of Afghanistan, this modernization framework structures Moghadam’s comparative work on Middle East and North Africa more generally.³ As a result, the gender (and other, including class and urban-rural) repressive and disciplining aspects of secular projects are treated as anomalous rather than as constitutive. Moreover, from this perspective, women’s nonsecular beliefs or politics can only be understood as a “false consciousness,” rather than as part of complex religious-class-gender subjectivities and locations that at times challenge, reproduce, benefit from, or comply with various hierarchies and power regimes.

Minoo Moallem, Deniz Kandiyoti, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Nilüfer Göle,
among others, have explicitly argued that Middle East and North Africa gender scholarship should move away from endorsing modernization or traditionalism, developmentalist paradigms, and binaries of East/West, insider/outsider, secular/Islamist, and authentic/inauthentic. Remaining locked in such categories allows the universalistic (Western) Enlightenment project to be posited against "an Islamic universalism based on principles of an immutable divine order." Such categorical thinking also legitimizes modernist "feminist civilizing mission[s]" and, I would argue, enables a problematic "indigenous" or "authentic" opposition based on false constructions of political, ideological, cultural, or racial-ethnic purism.

All contemporary political, social, intellectual, and ideological projects are both modern and postmodern, if not always self-consciously modernist and postmodernist, because they are hybrid, rather than produced in geographically, ideologically, or culturally insular contexts. Moreover, the advocates of modernist or traditionalist projects are often strategic and selective in their mobilization of history, ideas, and material resources.

**AGENCY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND IDENTITY**

Scholars in Middle East and North Africa gender studies have demonstrated the complexity of women's lives and choices. In the interest of not representing women as victims to our readers, however, some scholars exaggerate Middle East and North Africa women's agency in relation to social constraints. Contributions on subjectivity and identity in Middle East and North Africa studies have increased understanding of how choices are experienced, articulated, and acted on in particular moments. I use the term "identity" to signify a person's understanding of who s/he is and how s/he belongs, whereas "subjectivity" signifies selfhood as constituted through language, power relations, and embodied experiences. In feminist scholarship, "subjectivity" usually implies not only a self constituted through "subjection," but also choices, signifying individual agency. Feminist interest in subjectivity compels engagement with everyday lives and meaning-making, including quotidian and collective methods of resistance and empowerment. Indeed, this interest in the everyday, subjectivity, and agency, I would argue, is one of the main
differences between feminist and the more dominant (so-called neutral) scholarship on the region. “Identity,” too, is linked to agency in that it implies ideological, emotional, or political alliances. Although these alliances can often be predicted by shared subjectivities in particular historical contexts—based on racial, ethnic, national, class, gender, religious, sexual, or residence positions—human agency and creativity assure a range of possibilities.

Too often, both subjectivity and identity are understood in reified, reductive, ahistorical, and essentializing ways in relation to Middle East and North Africa people and movements. For example, the continuous articulation and renegotiation of “family” and “tribe” as locations, association forms, and sources of identity in Middle East and North Africa are frequently underestimated in the service of primordial or ahistorical understandings. In contrast, Linda Layne’s *Home and Homeland: The Dialogics of Tribal and National Identities in Jordan*, which focuses on the cultural and political distinctions made between bedouinness, Jordanianness, and Palestinianness in post-1970s Jordan, demonstrates how these identities are emergent, contextual, and contingent. They are articulated interactionally but also in relation to local histories and state discourses and policies. In work with a gender focus, Rhoda Kanaaneh’s book on narratives of birthing and childrearing among Palestinians in the Galilee, as well as her research on Palestinian men who volunteer for Israeli military service, demonstrate not only plural subjectivities and contingent identities, but also the contradictory strands that constitute subjectivity and identity.

Studying the relationship between migration and the ethnic and gender identities of Circassian women in two historical moments, Seteney Shami argues that the identities of diasporic peoples are always in “motion” and, in contrast to identities bound by nation-states, likely to “affirm multiple attachments, deterritorialization, and cultural hybridity.” I agree with Shami that forced migrations are likely to intensify identity fluidity, but I suggest that the subjectivities and identities of nonmigrants are also formed in dynamic interaction with people, transnational cultural, material, and ideational flows, and state discourse.

Suad Joseph’s work is invaluable in challenging the cross-cultural relevance of Nancy Chodorow’s binary between female relationality and
male disconnection based on feminist object relations theory. However, I would argue that Joseph’s contention that Arab selfhood for both women and men is best understood through a framework of “patriarchal connectivity” has helped to prop up an essentialist binary that opposes an individualistic, autonomous “Western” liberal self to a connected, familial, sacrificing Arab or “Eastern” self. With respect to kin solidarities, Mounira Charrad’s States and Women’s Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco powerfully demonstrates the manner in which family law is often a “blueprint for social order” in the Maghreb. She successfully challenges Western theoretical frameworks privileging Marxian class analysis in understanding state formation, reinforcing rather the idea of plural paths to state formation. However, because Charrad’s discussion of kin solidarities is premised on a modernity/traditionist framework, it underestimates the extent to which their significance is continuously reconstituted. This framework, as I have noted elsewhere, bypasses the possibility of seeing kin solidarities as bases of collective power or even alternative sources of state power. In addition, the privileging of kin as explanatory takes for granted the political and other stakes for different actors who “tribalize” or “familialize” solidarities and identity categories.

Both Joseph and Charrad emphasize the extent to which kin solidarities are not only important bases for social organization and relations but also accrue evocative and powerful meaning systems. It also seems important to stress the instability of selves, the plurality of family forms, and the ways these constructs are rearticulated in shifting social, political, and discursive contexts. As their own and other research has demonstrated, modern states in the region have reconstituted and benefited from various forms of family patriarchy as inscribed in policies and civil and personal status laws. Moreover, state militarism, which is dependent on male conscription into armed and police forces, influences how citizenship, family life, and sexuality are experienced and defined by differently situated women and men. Furthermore, as I discuss below, late capitalist globalization is critical to how these relations are constituted and experienced. These complex relationships render problematic any simple contrast between the rational bonds of citizenship and the affective bonds of family. Identities are as dynamic, imbricated, and context-responsive in Middle East and North Africa as they are elsewhere.
Imagining Feminisms

Focusing more narrowly on gendered subjectivities and identities, Maxine Molyneux's distinction between "strategic" and "practical" gender interests in relation to women and the Nicaraguan revolution provoked a rich body of feminist research that has influenced Middle East and North Africa gender studies. Women's strategic gender interests and struggles were seen to be focused on "overcoming women's subordination [as women]" and their practical gender interests and struggles were seen to be linked to basic survival issues of self and family. This binary reinforced a feminist ideological avoidance of the socioeconomic inequalities that divide women internationally and within societies, because educated, secular, and/or economically well-off women often appeared to be more strategic in these terms, which narrow definitions of legitimate feminist struggle. Such conceptualizations, as Raka Ray has noted, are also essentializing in that they cast gender as the natural and primary subjectivity for women, subsuming national, class, religious, or other orientations, locations, or desires.

Feminist research shows that nationalist projects are usually premised on gendered symbolisms that make women the object of desire or control while constructing men's national subservience to a different racial group or colonial power as a feminized equivalent to the subordination of women to men. Thus women's ability to express their own national desires and aspirations is symbolically limited. Feminist research on nationalism has focused on the constitutive relationship between nationalist projects and racialized-ethnicized patriarchies and heteronormativity, largely eliding the issue of gendered and sexual subjectivity. This may be because the broad units of analysis—ideology, meta-discourse, and policy—often supercede subjectivity and individual and collective meaning-making. It may also be that some feminist scholars continue to treat gender as a stand-alone category, at best intersecting with other locations and identities, rather than existing in mutually constitutive relationship with them and often superceded in importance by them. Whether one is addressing religiosity or nationalism, these are areas in which Middle East and North Africa gender scholarship has made important contributions.

Rajeswari Mohan's "Loving Palestine: Nationalist Activism and Feminist Agency in Leila Khaled's Subversive Bodily Acts," as well as my own
research on Palestinian women activists in the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Palestinian Federation of Women’s Action Committees, challenge the unitary construction of nationalist identity as an antifeminist “false” consciousness. Both of us argue, on the contrary, that Palestinian nationalist engagement has facilitated feminist agency for many women, even as hegemonic versions of the two projects often coexist contentiously and construct each other in mutually exclusive terms. Mohan also challenges the gender essentializing construction of militant resistance as necessarily and inherently antifeminist by demonstrating the ways in which Leila Khaled, an activist with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, concurrently used and recast hegemonic constructions of nationalism, feminism, and patriarchy. Khaled poses a more indirect challenge as well to dominant feminist constructions of violence as somehow inherently masculinist and antithetical to feminism. Although great care needs to be exercised to avoid fetishizing or romanticizing subaltern violence, in the context of Middle East and North Africa we have learned to be wary of what is defined as violence, where and by whom such determinations are made, and the manner in which gendered and racialized lenses make violence visible or invisible.21

The relationship between religious subjectivity, gender, and daily practices has elicited complex feminist analyses in Middle East and North Africa studies. Here I am thinking of Arlene Macleod’s findings in Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo that various rationales (not necessarily religious) guided working-class Cairene women who dressed modestly and Göle’s research in The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling on the everyday experiences and complex motivations of women adherents to Turkish Islamic movements. Ayse Saktanber’s research in Living Islam: Women, Religion, and the Politicization of Culture in Turkey on contemporary Turkish women activists in a movement oriented toward “cultural Islam” demonstrates how they focus on self-actualization through “render[ing] Islam a living social practice.” Saktanber argues that the women “reorder and recontextualize [religious and secular] dominant discourses in their everyday life through the medium of reflexive action,” and demonstrates the difficulty of opposing a liberated, modern, agentic, secular subjectivity to an oppressed, backward, abjected, religious one.22
Similarly, Saba Mahmood shows how pious Egyptian Muslim women of various socioeconomic backgrounds used the lessons of gender-segregated associations to cultivate "the ideal [Muslim womanly] virtuous self." Mahmood's call for feminists to disconnect women's agency from liberatory practice has been addressed in previous feminist scholarship about women involved in racist, religious, or right-wing political movements. More vexing for gender research in general, I would argue, is how to address the continued prevalence of precultural and presocial physiological and psychological understandings of gender relations, masculinities, femininities, and sexualities in feminist and antifeminist or reactionary projects that selectively claim feminist idioms.

What are some of the ways to address the paradoxes and ambiguities in subjectivities, whatever their specific configurations? Methodologically, Göle's research points to the importance of exploring such issues through "subjective constructions of meanings, cultural identities, and social conflicts." In a Lacanian conceptualization useful for understanding the relationship between belief systems and subjectivity, Mary Layoun argues for seeing nationalist ideologies as ongoing narratives of desire for an always impossible perfect unity that men often symbolize as a conjugal union between husband (as nationalist) and wife (as land). Layoun insists that such narratives "will always be contradictory, full of gaps and slippage. Therein lies the vulnerability of nationalism-as-narrative, perhaps of any narrative. But there too—in those moments of narrative slippage and contradiction, or, if you like, in those moments of narrative silence—lie possibilities for recasting or at least of renegotiating nationalism-as-narrative, rhetorically and perhaps grammatically as well."

It will often be those on the margins (women, poor people, and racial-ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities) who rearticulate hegemonic belief systems and narratives to include themselves—with complicated and not necessarily "radical" results. We need more attention to such contradictions, gaps, and slippages—the spaces not at the ideological or political center in which more inclusive and destabilizing visions are articulated individually and collectively. Facile formulations about the relationship between nationalism and feminism, or religiosity and feminism, deny the possibility of subjectivities that are not strictly based on the presumed and
essentialized criterion of womanness. They also underestimate the extent
to which all belief systems are contested and porous and take for granted
the often complex processes through which gendered outcomes are pro-
duced. In contrast to simplifying its imperatives, researchers might more
fruitfully engage with feminism, in Ella Shohat’s words, as “a polyseme
site of contradictory positions.”

SEXUALITIES
Evelyne Accad has argued that rather than accepting a research hierarchy
that privileges poverty and war, gender and feminist scholars of Middle
East and North Africa must recognize the fundamental centrality of sexu-
ality and interpersonal relationships to “social and political problems
in the Middle East.” As discussed earlier, sexuality-focused studies face field
research and funding obstacles, especially from Middle East and North
Africa states. Lilia Labidi suggests that given the authoritarianism of many
Middle East and North Africa states toward archival and field research in
postcolonial periods, contemporary film and popular literature are rich
and relatively unrestricted sources for exploring debates about sexuality.
These sources, she believes, indicate a generation gap between Maghrebi
young people and their parents with regard to sexuality.

Many studies of sexuality revisit religious texts and discourses in early
Islamic periods. This strategy has undermined recent repressive and total-
izing nationalist or religion-based narratives that deploy “tradition” and
“authenticity” to define what is (il)licit in Islam or regional cultures and
societies with respect to gender and sexuality. But this approach is never-
thless fraught with limitations, especially the recasting of “Islam” or
“culture” (“Arab,” “tribal,” “patriarchal,” and so forth) as both founda-
tional and superordinate axes for understanding sex, sexuality, and gender
relations across time and place. Such assumptions underestimate factors
such as class relations; local and regional state and movement politics; the
transnational flows of people, products, and ideas; and (historically contin-
gent) interactions with imperial, colonial, postcolonial, and neoliberal cap-
italist regimes. Although religious beliefs and other cultural factors are to
different degrees relevant for understanding sex and sexuality, they are not
independent variables. Assuming that religion and culture are explanatory
elides how such factors may be relevant to a given research question and
the manner in which they are historically constituted through a range of
materialities, discourses, and experiences.

Fatima Mernissi's The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's
Rights in Islam is a classic book of feminist scholarship that challenges the
claim that Islam imposes "traditional" gender and sexual relations." Her
work revisits the social and political contexts in which parts of the Qur'an
relevant to gender were revealed, the gender politics of different followers
of the Prophet Muhammad, and the impact these men had on juridical
discourses about women, gender, and sex. The book undermines contem-
porary misogynist and gender-conservative religious arguments by
demonstrating that they are contrary to the gender-inclusive and sex-
friendly impulses of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an. This strat-
egy powerfully illustrates the invented and context-specific production of
the repressive "traditions" deployed by contemporary male Islamist elites.
It also enables Islam as a space from within which women, especially the
pious and Islamist activists, can challenge the authenticity of sex- and gen-
der-repressive logics. At the same time, this widely read text simplifies his-
tory into periods "before Islam," in which women and their sexualities
were subordinated, and "after Islam," in which the prophetic impulse was
liberatory but went awry as a result of the patriarchal motives of various
male elites. Moreover, it reproduces the reductive logic of contemporary
Islamist gender- and sex-repressive discourse by reinforcing an ahistorical
notion of religion as the only legitimate basis for discussing these issues
with respect to Middle East and North Africa societies.

Another compelling study is Basim Musallam's Sex and Society in Islam:
Birth Control before the Nineteenth Century, which analyzes early Muslim juris-
prudence and medieval Arab erotica with regard to birth control to chal-
lenge Western projections that construct Islam as sexually repressive of
women and as largely procreative in its sexual morality. More generally,
Musallam demonstrates that birth control was widespread and socially
and religiously accepted, spouses had a right to sexual pleasure, and prac-
tices such as "masturbation [were believed] to be lawful in the absence of a
legitimate partner to satisfy sexual lust" for both women and men.38

Najmabadi has published a range of research relevant to sexuality based
Frances S. Hasso

on historicized analysis of Iranian texts. Her “Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies,” for example, addresses the twentieth century sanitization and de-eroticization of women’s language in moral essays, novels, travelogues, and other cultural products as part of a “modernizing” impulse. In “Hazards of Modernity and Morality,” she demonstrates how both Iranian Pahlavi and Islamist visions of the national past and future were worked out over deployments of women’s morality and sexual behavior. More recently in “The Morning After: Travail of Sexuality and Lore in Modern Iran,” Najmabadi analyzes sexual mores through a popular contemporary Iranian novel, exploring the range of its deployments by differently situated groups in Iran.

A range of contributions undertaken within marriage, population, and family-focused studies pay significant attention to sociopolitical, economic, and legal context, while also addressing lived experiences, meaning-making, and everyday practices with respect to sexuality. These works also demonstrate how gender and sexuality are often at the heart of political and social order, rather than marginal concerns. Shahla Haeri’s Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi’i Iran, for example, analyzes Shi’i temporary marriage in 1980s Iran to show how religious and political elites were concerned with controlling sexual behavior. She also demonstrates the mutable nature of Islamic law, under which sex-related rules were often manipulated creatively by women and men. Moreover, she highlights the contrasts between popular beliefs, which fetishized virginity and derided temporary wives, and religious precepts, which encouraged sexuality within “licit,” including temporary, unions. In the “The ‘Honor’ of the State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey,” Ayse Parla discusses state-sponsored virginity exams against women suspected of illegal prostitution or immodest behavior, women political prisoners, high school girls, and girls in state orphanages, hospitals, and dormitories in contemporary Turkey, illustrating the manner in which heterosexuality is an important node of modern state power, surveillance, and control.

Diane Singerman’s Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo demonstrates how the combination of increased poverty and unemployment rates, as well as more lavish expectations in marriage negotiations, make it increasingly difficult for poor and working-class Cairenes to marry and thus satisfy sexual desires or establish procreative
families. She also illustrates the frequent disjuncture between lived experience and religious and cultural precepts with respect to sexual and marital practice. Homa Hoodfar’s *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo* illustrates the recursive relationship between socioeconomic policies and family dynamics, particularly with respect to sex, marriage, divorce, and family planning, in a similar group in Cairo. Susan Martha Kahn’s *Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel* analyzes reproduction from the perspectives of the Israeli state, Jewish religious authorities, and Jewish Israeli women—single, married, pious, secular, heterosexual, or lesbian—who want to become mothers. She shows how the combination of Israeli state pronatalism for Jews and new, state-supported assisted reproduction technologies have reinforced motherhood as an ideal for all Jewish women and have had unexpected consequences with respect to sexuality and religious rules regarding procreation. While this problem can be partly attributed to the book’s scope, Kahn leaves latent the racist and racial implications of her research findings.³¹

There is limited attention to marginalized sexualities in Middle East and North Africa gender scholarship. Addressing contemporary homo- and heterosexualities and sexual identities is Pinar Ilkkaracan’s edited collection of fiction, personal testimonies, cartoons, and research titled *Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies.*³² The book is available in Turkish and English, although a proposed Arabic edition reportedly required excision of pieces addressing homosexuality. Another example is *Al-Raida Magazine,* a publication of the Institute for Women’s Studies in the Arab World, at the Lebanese American University, which has featured research, fiction, and testimonials on sexuality, embodiment, and masculinity.

If one accepts the contemporary Western queer distinction between homosocial and homoerotic “practices” versus non-normative sexual “identities” that require self-declaration and naming (“visibility” in Foucauldian parlance), it is difficult to argue that there was silence and invisibility with respect to sexuality in Arab or Islamic histories.³³ The premise of public confession in current queer theory assumes that the willingness to claim membership in an identity group is superior to merely engaging in a range of sexual practices. Research on sexuality and other identities has demonstrated, however, the ways in which visibility politics
based on identity are viewed plurally by marginalized communities. For example, marginalized sexualities intersect with other locations and identities such as race-ethnicity, immigration status, class, political ideology, and gender in ways that problematize a uniform assumption of visibility politics as invariably legitimate or emancipatory. Moreover, although publicly professed identity categories and membership can provide a basis for political empowerment and rights-based claims-making, they are also premised on boundaries that must be policed to determine who is in the group and who is not. These boundaries, their usually self-appointed monitors, and the state policies often created in response to claims-making often reify what are relatively fluid, plural, and context-responsive subjectivities and practices. Nevertheless, Joseph Massad’s contention that lesbian and gay identity in Egypt is strictly a product of U.S. and European-based transnational queer organizations is essentializing in defining as impossible such identities among “authentic” Egyptian men. Deeper understanding of such identities and practices requires context-specific exploration of meaning-making, and a recognition that such processes will interact in plural ways with the politics and discourses of transnational organizations and movements.

It is, however, true that colonial, racial, imperial, and neo-imperial relations of inequality—as well as various types of resistance to them—are often played out through and signified by sexual and gender relations and symbolism. Jarrod Hayes argues that sexual diversity “has long been a characteristic by which Western observers have produced a so-called Oriental difference,” in the process “normalizing what constitutes Western sexuality.” In turn, the colonized have often responded with resistance that treats marginalized sexualities as the result of foreign contagion—part and parcel of the subordinating project. Similarly, according to As’ad AbuKhalil, contemporary Islamist and moralist social movements and state discourse often attempt to delegitimate sexual heterogeneity by specious arguments for the foreign origins of nonheteronormative sexual practices. Hayes depicts Maghrebian postcolonial cultural texts, in contrast, as “unburying” sexual and gender insubordination, ethnic and religious plurality, polyvocality, and hybridity.

The proliferation of Web-based movements and chatrooms catering to
Arab and Muslim lesbians and gays indicates a rise in sexuality-based identity politics premised on visibility and voice. One Web site established following September 11, 2001, for example, is called “Sehakia: The Voice of Arab Lesbians” (www.sehakia.org) and is produced by the N'Deeses “collective of Arab lesbians or lesbians of Arabic language and culture.” The group chose to use the Arabic word for lesbian “according to our objective to give voice to the Arab lesbians. That’s the reason why this website will be, as much as possible, trilingual: French, ARABIC [caps in original], and English.” This description highlights language-ethnicity, sexuality, and gender as inseparable facets of identity. It also indicates the extent to which voice and visibility, or claiming and “unburying,” remain powerful avenues in the constitution of subjectivities and communities and in the naming of new rights, particularly for the marginalized, although such articulations are also likely to produce new disciplinary mechanisms.

The Limits of Middle East and North Africa as a Category

Following the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), research has explored the ways in which imperial, colonial, and neocolonial projects have depended on gendered assumptions and fetishized representations of women in Middle East and North Africa, as well as the often gendered responses of anticolonial, nationalist, Islamist, and other modernizers and self-appointed leaders.7 Gender scholarship has had more difficulty addressing the connections, for people, processes, and institutions in Middle East and North Africa, between the global, regional, and the local. As Shohat argues, “[a]ny serious analysis has to begin from the premise that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities, but, rather, as part of a set of permeable, interwoven relationships.” Göle similarly calls for focusing on “interpenetration and hybridization between the particularistic and universalistic, the local and the global.”8 Although Middle East and North Africa studies have to various degrees outgrown and even challenged its generating forces, which focused on containment, such research continues to have difficulty with the unboundedness of empire and the uncontainable flows of late modern globalization. Among the recent exceptions in this regard is Susan
Frances S. Hasso

Ossman's *Three Faces of Beauty: Casablanca, Paris, Cairo*, which compares beauty salons (and to a lesser extent public bathhouses and cafes) in contemporary Casablanca, Paris, and Cairo. Although this work successfully demonstrates how "the salon takes on meaning in different worlds of beauty," it does not fully address how such spaces form women clients' subjectivities and affect the "shape of the public sphere." Marilyn Booth analyzes late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural deployments of Jeanne D'Arc by Egyptians to demonstrate the unpredictable nature of transnational flows and the ways in which the "West" was selectively redefined by different Egyptians to serve various political and identity purposes. Also using Egypt as at least partial "ground," but complicating the space and its circulating discourses during the 1994 Cairo Population Conference, Donna Lee Bowen addresses how Islamic jurisprudence, conservative political Islamic discourses, state politics, Vatican politics, "religious principles and values" in the face of Western neoliberalism, and the actual beliefs and practices of Muslim women, their physicians, and local ulama (religious experts) came together to structure the debate about abortion.

Other studies using transnational perspectives include Kamran Asdar Ali's *Planning the Family in Egypt: New Bodies, New Selves*, which systematically explores the interactions among population control imperatives, hegemonic gender ideologies, Islamist and other Muslim discourse on contraception for women, male labor migration, and the family planning experiences and beliefs of women and men in contemporary Egypt. Similarly, Kanaaneh's *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel* explores family planning and birthing representations, ideologies, and practices among Palestinians in the Galilee region of Israel. She discusses the complex interactions of Zionist "political arithmetics" with Palestinian modernist aspirations, consumption practices, ideas of cultural authenticity, gendered desires, and family planning practices. Marcia Inhorn's *Local Babies, Global Science: Gender, Religion, and In Vitro Fertilization in Egypt*, focuses on local responses to imported in-vitro fertilization technologies by Egyptian couples. This study demonstrates how these technologies are "reshaped" by "local cultural ideologies, practices, and structural forces not found in most Western countries," and in turn "reshape local culture in various ways." However, Inhorn relies on a limiting binary that assumes current technologies are uniformly used and accessible in the "West."
Issues of origin, the local, and migration of ideas, people, products, and practices inflect my own recent comparative research on marriage and sexuality. When explaining the phenomena of 'urfi ("customary"), misyaar, and other nontraditional sexual and marital "contracts" among Sunni Muslims, for example, women and men in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) and Egypt often evoke "Islamic" conceptualizations of sexual desire and satisfaction as natural and good and of "instinctive" physical needs whose fulfillment is imperative. These narratives parallel those structuring discussion of the consumption and need for products, as shown, for example, especially in the U.A.E. where widely available satellite television stations broadcast popular Mexican, Egyptian, and U.S. programming. On the Web, a number of cross-national and national Muslim chatrooms in which such relationships are discussed are popular in both Egypt and the U.A.E.

Egyptians and Emiratis to different degrees believe that unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and increased wedding costs and dowry expectations among the urban lower-middle classes delay marriage, the primary licit channel for assuaging sexual desire. These barriers are believed to have increased the necessity for innovation in fulfilling sexual "instincts," although the scale and nature of the economic factors dramatically differ because Egypt is one of the poorest countries in the region and the U.A.E. one of the wealthiest. Indeed, Emirati men of less means will frequently marry Egyptian women (using regular and 'urfi contracts) because the marriage costs and expectations of their families are lower. In addition, in the U.A.E., regional male migration, as well as the state's active importation of women and men laborers in an adamantly tariff and tax-free, investment and tourist-friendly economy, facilitates the outmarriage of Emirati men, as well as their taking of non-Emirati sexual partners using various modalities. Emirati women, in turn, particularly the high proportion who are college-educated, are less inclined to marry young Emirati men schooled in relatively patriarchal conceptualizations of family and marriage.

In both Egypt and the U.A.E., then, globalization differentially affects these forms and practices. New bodies and desires are articulated as people selectively draw on traditional and contemporary options—facilitated by cultural flows, human migration, and communication technolo-
gies—even as the contexts in which this occurs are structured by local histories and socioeconomic, political, and cultural limits. Local, religious, “cultural,” purely economistic, universalist, or regionally bounded explanations alone are limited in the tools they provide to understand such phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This article is not a call for research that bypasses the difficult and important work of learning the relevant histories, institutional workings, theoretical and ideological frameworks, and languages of the region. Unfortunately, a still surprising proportion of English-language writing on Middle East and North Africa is produced and unproblematically consumed despite its glaring gaps in these areas. Rather the point is to recognize local and regional embeddedness in relations that are multidirectional and the extent to which social dynamics are often explicable through less territorialized and culturally bounded analytical perspectives.

This article demonstrates that Middle East and North Africa gender research is increasingly traversing local/global, modernity/tradition, religious/secular and other divides to address the dynamic and complex realities of the region. Oppositional frameworks are inadequate because they miss the extent to which “the parameters of the local and global are often . . . permeable constructs,” the plurality of the “local” in terms of identities and concerns, the multiple global possibilities, and the many lines that breach the local-global and “center-periphery” divides. Such polarities also mask inequitable access to economic, political, and academic resources and power among nation-states, individual researchers, and ourselves as researchers (indigenous, diasporic, and foreign) and many of the people we study. Finally, such frameworks serve to reproduce orientalism and its equally problematic occidentalist reversals.

NOTES

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26. Evelyné Accad, “Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradictions for Contemporary Women in the Middle East,” in Women and Sexuality in Muslim Societies, ed. Pınar Ilkkaracan (Istanbul: Women for Women’s Human Rights/Kadinın İnsan Hakları Projesi—New Ways, 2000), 37; Lilia Labidi, a professor of psychology at the University of Tunis, made these comments in September 2002, during a panel discussion at the First World Congress of Middle East Studies, in Mainz, Germany.


32. Ilkkaracan, Women and Sexuality.


40. Kamran Asdar Ali, Planning the Family in Egypt: New Bodies, New Selves (Austin: University of

41. Here I borrow part of the subtitle of Ali's *Planning the Family*.
