

Chapter 18

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Re-Routing the Sexual: A Regional and Relational Lens in Theorizing Sexuality in the Middle East (West Asia)

Introduction

Can the adoption of a regional perspective in theorizing gender and sexuality serve as a productive feminist tool for knowledge-making? In this chapter, I argue that regionalism offers a unique perspective on researching gender and sexuality; one that can remain feminist while working to circumvent the cycle of perpetual reference to Western and Northern centres, hence contributing to rearticulating feminist knowledge in a troubled field.

Theories of the transnational travel of ideas frequently suffer not only from a Northern and Western orientation, but also from a recurring flattening of geopolitical situatedness and difference, often in favour of a universalizing sameness. Even when difference is acknowledged, it seldom escapes being defined in relation to the Northern and Western centres. In my work as a gender and sexuality scholar, I am acutely aware of the messy and often violent imposition of concepts such as sexuality or Queer Theory in post-colonial areas, including the Middle East (hereafter West Asia). At the same time, I see the potential in building Queer and feminist solidarities across the globe through the transnational flow of ideas, people, and agendas. Women, feminist activists, and scholars in the region are intimately familiar with the contradiction posed by transnationalism; they navigate a yearning for global sisterhood amongst the violent hierarchization imposed on them through the very claim of globality.

In what follows, I review how scholars have theorized this interaction as it specifically pertains to the study of sexuality in and about West Asia. I reveal how ‘stuck’ the scholarship is in this contradiction, and then suggest that we turn our attention towards a regional lens. Seeing through such a lens opens up the potential for theorizing gender and sexuality as a

set of power relations configured among various actors, systems, and politics in West Asia, and *not only* through the centre–periphery route. By moving away from this dominant route, feminist and Queer scholarship can shed more light on the neighbouring context, on regional relations, and on relationality itself as a mode of analysis, hence creating a feminist alternative.

Understanding gender and sexuality studies in Middle East Studies

Although I have begun using West Asia instead of the Middle East, I continue using Middle East Studies when referring to the field of area studies itself. Sexuality Studies in the field of Middle East Area Studies faces an irreconcilable tension today: how can scholars use a modern European category of analysis such as ‘sexuality’, accompanied by Western-originating theories such as Queer Theory, to conceptualize the region’s erotic practices? While some scholars have argued that one can indeed use and expand these conceptual toolkits in ways that make them relevant to Middle Eastern histories of desire (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008), others wondered what Queer Theory would look like ‘when it is not routed through Euro-American histories, sexualities, locations, or bodies’ (Mikdashi and Puar 2016,), and whether it is indeed possible for Queer Theory to divest itself of its US origins.

This debate has pushed the field of Middle Eastern Sexuality Studies in two directions. The first is most prominently marked by the work of Joseph Massad, who posits that the study of sexuality in a previously colonized region is a continuation of colonial and imperial intervention (Massad 2007; 2015). How can a Western and Northern field and its concepts *not* travel through imperialist channels? If we look at the region today, many of its current political and socio-economic conditions are strongly tied to its subordinate relationship with US and EU imperialist politics. Imperialist militarized intervention is rampant, including for example the bloody and failed occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, the war in Syria, heavily marked by Russian and American interventions, or the 2020 American “Deal of the Century” plan that lends impunity to Israel’s ongoing illegal occupation of Palestine, to name just a few. Beyond militarized occupation, the region has also suffered the political undermining of

democratic aspirations, most notably during the Arab Revolts of 2011, economic sanctions, and economic setbacks due to IMF and World Bank lending policies. And while transnational solidarity and assistance have also flourished, some are implicated in perpetuating the region's inferiority, including transnational NGOs and the humanitarian machine. Therefore, anyone navigating gender and sexual non-normativity in the region is primarily experiencing this regime of global economic and racial inequality first-hand.

It is thus no surprise that several scholars see fields such as Sexuality Studies, Queer Theory, or Gay and Lesbian Studies as yet another Western and Northern intervention into Southern and Eastern lives, and a continuation of the drawing of Orientalist depictions of the Other using gender, sexuality, and the erotic more broadly (Said 1978; Boone 2014). In this sense, scholars such as Massad would argue that even contemporary identification using the transnational categories of LGBT(IQ) is part of the 'Gay International's' mission and 'incitement to discourse', which results in creating 'homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they did not [previously] exist' (2007, 163). With such a stance, Massad directly criticizes regional and local LGBT rights NGOs for taking part in perpetuating Western and Northern imperialist hetero- and homonormativity. By tracing the history of non-normative desire, he demonstrates that the very modern concept of sexuality relies on the unequal transnational travel of ideas, bodies, and politics (Massad 2007; 2015).

A second direction in the field supports the expansion in excavating and (re)writing the history of sexuality, but rejects the Massadian depiction of sexuality's unidirectional travel from West to East (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008). Rather, its supporters see Queer Theory as useful, if not essential, for informing the conceptualizing of contemporary non-normative desires, and even past ones such as sexual regulation in 19th-century Iran (Najmabadi 2008). In other words, this scholarship agrees that it is vital to first rewrite the history of erotic desire – an overlap with Massad and other historians, as well as with decolonial approaches to theorizing gender and sexuality (Lugones 2008) – but still insists on the relevance of Queer Theory and transnational Sexuality Studies more broadly to the conceptualization of this history (Traub 2008).

What these two directions have in common is that they frequently skip over the very people they are speaking about; the gender and sexually non-normative people who are navigating this conundrum first-hand today (Qubaiova 2019). This is partly because much

of the scholarship on West Asian sexualities began approaching the debate from the fields of history and literary studies (El-Rouayheb 2005; Habib 2007; Mourad 2013; Hammad 2016). At the same time, engaging directly with people's daily lived realities through anthropological studies has been difficult due to the region's prolonged suffering from Western-led wars and illegal occupations, which not only limited access but also rendered life 'overbearing' for local researchers (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017, 4). Today, emerging anthropological and ethnographic works are multiplying and answering this need, many of them written by local or regional researchers (Kaedbey 2014; Merabet 2014; Moussawi 2020). However, they remain few, and some apply Queer Theory without much interrogation of its US origins beyond a passing acknowledgment.

This debate continues to pose a difficult task for scholars of contemporary sexuality and activists alike, who are attempting to capture the reality of people's non-normative lives in the present, as they navigate the current manifestation of the above tension. As a feminist scholar from the region, I cannot ignore the relevance of Queer Theory and Sexuality Studies for analysing the region's contemporary politics and lived realities (Qubaiova 2019). After all, as Anna Tsing reminds us, in a world where the local and the global continuously interact with friction, the unequal contamination of ideas, bodies, and environments is inevitable (Tsing 2015, 2005). At the same time, the nascent field of Queer Sexuality Studies in West Asia must not ignore its deep attachment to the European and American theoretical frameworks that frequently force each conversation back to the Northern and Western centre, as Massad warns us. How, then, can we conceptualize sexuality without reaffirming imperialism and without denying the place of gender and sexual non-normativity in our lives? How might we move the debate in a productive direction while acknowledging the central tension within it?

This conundrum is not exactly new. Similar kinds of debates about the globality of feminism, or the place of a universal understanding of human rights, have been fleshed out between Western, post-colonial, and post-socialist scholars for decades (Mohanty 2003; Bakshi, Jivraj, and Posocco 2016; Tlostanova, Thapar-Bjorkert, and Koobak 2016). While

feminist movements that claim to be global often hold White¹ and Western privilege at their centre, the transnational movement of feminist ideas and people has also enabled precious alliances that could exert pressure both locally and globally. Similarly, while the Global North has used the discourse of human rights (HR) to justify illegal occupation and war in the Global South, many across the Global South have adopted and redefined this discourse to seek legitimacy for their civil rights (Basu 2016); including, for example, the Lebanese Women's Right to Nationality and Full Citizenship campaign that argues for the right of Lebanese women to pass nationality to their spouses and children.

While ideas travel transnationally, there remains far too little interest in writing the sexual or the erotic outside of the frame of the West–North to East–South route. In fact, such a suggestion is often treated as unimaginable. For example, during the numerous times that I presented my study on alternative motherhood practices among sexually non-normative Syrian refugee men in Beirut, I was always met with the same question: 'how is their practice of motherhood related to Black queer house-ballroom kinship cultures in New York?' The short answer is: 'it isn't'. The long answer forces me to refer back to the US as a centre of knowledge production, acknowledge the Queer house-ballroom cultures in New York (even though peripheral within the US context, they are treated as universalizable in the context of Queer kinship), and emphasize that my study is grounded in local and regional Arab kinship structures. From the point of view of a feminist regional lens, the main question here should be: why should we assume that a Syrian refugee in Lebanon has more in common with Black and Latino house-ballroom cultural practices of Queer kinship in the Bronx, than with concepts of kinship and practices of motherhood in Homs, Aleppo, Damascus, or Beirut? The naturalization of this assumption not only reflects the dominance of West–North travel to the South–East, but also demonstrates that even creating new concepts or attempting new routes is unthinkable within the academy without a reference back to the centre that would, ultimately, enrich knowledge about the centre itself and not the periphery. The subaltern can speak, but not without permission, redirection, and translation (Spivak 1988).

¹ I capitalize White to situate Whiteness as a racial category in an unequal racial system of power that privileges White over Black. Drawing attention to the category through capitalization removes its neutral appearance as simply an ahistorical colour. See Appiah (2020) for a summary of this debate.

There remains little theorization of how diverse members of the region affect each other, how they interact, and what role this interaction plays in establishing gender and sexual norms and non-normativities. How is it, for example, that the reclamation of Queer from a slur to a theory is assumed to have more resonance in Arabic-speaking communities than the regional travel of derogatory Arabic terms such as *Shaz* or *Luti*? How can a regional lens rectify this absence and multiply the routes of knowledge travel?

Regionalism

I propose regionalism as a useful feminist analytical perspective that promises a richer understanding of gender, sexuality, and the erotic more broadly, as concepts shaped by inter-regional relations. Regionalism can remain feminist when we constantly acknowledge power inequality, when we break down limited conceptual binaries, and when we prioritize voices from the region itself and do not re-route them through the centre's channels.

Regionalism, however, has a border problem. Scholars of sexuality and regionalism have attempted to answer this critique by relying on 'queering' for border disruption. For example, Chiang and Wong argue that: 'the critical promise of queer regionalism lies precisely in its refusal to frame scalar units in a pre-defined way. Indeed, the elasticity in both the regional and the queer defies unifying and coherent scalar units' (2016, 4). If regionalism is imagined as a halfway point between the global and the local, then it does little to dismantle the operating scalar units. Additionally, relying on 'queering' as the sole strategy for challenging borders not only traps 'queer' into meaning only 'disruptive' – a reductionist function of Queer Theory – but it also still forces us into the same problematic of using Western and Northern tools uncritically. We must be more imaginative. This is why I imagine a regional lens to function together with the principle of relationality. Approaching sexuality through this lens means analysing social phenomena and practices *in relation* to contextual events within the region itself. It means shifting the scales of transnationalism from a perspective that privileges Western and Northern centrism and the unidirectional flow of

ideas, *and* also scaling up from a decolonial perspective that argues for excavating a pure local origin in local history.

I further argue that reading relationally, reading regionally, offers new insights into defining the sexual through the feminist principle of breaking persistent knowledge-making binaries between the West and North on the one hand, and the rest on the other, between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and in favour of prioritizing regional relations. Regionalism insists on the relevance of the broader neighbouring context in which phenomena such as sexual acts, practices, and activism take place, and offers a complication to the story of the sexual itself, extending it beyond being only a field stuck in a debate between transnational imposition and local authenticity.

In the next section, I demonstrate how to employ a regional lens. Firstly, I argue for the simple analytical outcome that is accomplished by renaming the Middle East as West Asia. Secondly, I show how inter-relational knowledge can offer new insights into gender regimes by analysing the gendered symbolism in the Treaty of Brotherhood between Syria and Lebanon. Finally, I end with suggestions on how to rewrite the history of sexual activism through offsetting the dominant interpretative frames.

What's in a name? From Middle East to West Asia

Scholars of Middle East Studies are acutely aware of the field's problematic name. One major issue is that the name continues to position the people in relation to Europe and ties them to a geographical space on the periphery. As many have noted, the region's name is connected to the Cold War era, during which states were divided in accordance with their political positions and strategic importance. After 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the region became a primary site of Western intervention, increasingly so in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent US-led War on Terror. These developments saw area studies become 'an intelligence-gathering force for consolidating US power' (Arondekar and Patel 2016, 152), while also becoming a central field from which to critique imperialist politics (Naber 2013). Because of this legacy, the name communicates the continuation of

colonial epistemological violence through contemporary imperialism; a process that decolonial thinkers refer to as the coloniality of power (Quijano 2000).

Another problem posed by the name is disagreement over whom is included. While some scholars see the Middle East as including only Arabic-speaking nation-states, others include Iran, Israel, and Turkey. Likewise, scholars often add Egypt due to its proximity to regional conditions, despite being geographically located in North Africa. In other instances, countries as far away as Afghanistan and Pakistan are included. Still, some choose to focus on Arab ethnicity as the region's main defining marker, choosing a term such as 'Arab-majority' countries, while openly acknowledging that the name erases ethnic diversity (Deeb and Winegar 2012). While scholars are careful to define whom they include in their use of the 'Middle East', politicians and the media in general have misused the term's wide applicability to consolidate their depiction of a hostile region that requires intervention. In such public discourse, Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and Kurd all became synonymous categories. Thus, instead of serving as a way to emphasize our shared history and experiences, the term is repeatedly misused to collapse ethnic and racial diversity in the service of racism. This dynamic is once again enabled by the term's function in modern imperialist history.

As noted earlier, in my work I have begun using West Asia instead of the Middle East (see for example Koshy 2003, quoted in Spivak 2003, 1), but I continue using Middle East Studies when referring to the field of area studies itself. This simple replacement is an attempt to disrupt the taken-for-granted name and expose the imperialist relations that continue to dominate its meaning. The sense of unfamiliarity and interruption that West Asia may cause the reader to experience is purposeful. It is a hiccup, a kind of jolt that forces us to re-imagine in relation to whom, or to where, is the region middle and/or east to? And what does West Asia mean? While undermining the region's problematic name, West Asia also opens up a new set of conversations with North, South, and East Asia, rather than serving as a route to Europe or the USA. Given some shared histories of language, colonialism, and modern capitalist imperialism, there is ample room to rethink the region through its relations to its geographically proximate neighbours. While not a perfect replacement, the analytical promise here is that such a term can provide a route to shake up some of the fundamental structures of knowledge. For example, Arondekar and Petal (2016) ask: what would the concept of race look like if it was not viewed solely through 'structures of

representation that foreground the Atlantic model' in the history of the transatlantic slave trade? (2016, 157). West Asia today is heavily reliant on East Asian migrant labour that is premised on gendered regimes of colourism and racial difference. While few academics remain committed to exploring this structure, a critical and theoretical account of racialization *between* these regions is hard to find. How might we better understand the function of race as an identity marker, and racism as a structure of inequality, if we consider it as one fundamental relation of labour and migration between West and East Asia? This does not mean throwing out the functioning definitions of race that are based on the transatlantic model; rather, it means focusing our analytical lens elsewhere; into our homes and neighbouring contexts.

Conceptualizing the Sexual Differently

I now proceed to give an example from my primary research site in Lebanon. Definitions of the sexual in Lebanon are intimately tied to regional power dynamics and political events, including geopolitical relationships with Syria, Palestine, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others. Relations with Syria in particular have tangible effects on the lives of people in Lebanon. Gendered narratives depicting the political relationship between Syria and Lebanon have frequently oscillated between images of the 'Arab brother' and the threatening, invading 'foreign other'. The feminist anthropologist Suad Joseph has argued that privileging the conjugal relationship as the main symbol of citizenship is an inadequate approach for theorizing state relations and citizenship itself in this context (Joseph 1999; 2000). Instead, Joseph claims that 'natal relationships often have been seen to compete with husband/wife relationships' and are frequently perceived as more powerful in the determining of social relations (Joseph 2000, 117). If we take natal relationships such as brotherhood seriously and examine their symbolic function in state discourse, then Joseph's analysis indicates that we can draw different conclusions about the very definitions of the sexual.

For example, in 1991, Syria and Lebanon signed the treaty of 'Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination', detailing the nature of their 'special brotherly tie' (United

Nations 1992). The treaty's text offers an astute depiction of this tenacious duality between Brother and Other. On the one hand, the treaty refers to the two states as 'brothers' and their relationship as 'fraternal' three times on the first page, citing 'roots of kinship, history, common affiliation, joint destiny and shared interests' as the maternal origins of this Arab fraternity, without explicitly making reference to the mother – the Arab Umma (nation).² In a move typical of modern nationalist discourses, the treaty employs pan-Arabist rhetoric and draws an imagined continuum between Syrian and Lebanese pre-colonial Arab unity and a future 'joint destiny' to underscore a naturalized movement forward towards progress (United Nations 1992). The brotherhood metaphor is thus useful in normalizing quite serious political and military conflicts between the two nations – which includes the Syrian occupation of Lebanon from the end of the civil war until 2005 – as nothing more than predictable and inevitable brotherly quarrels; that is, fights that do not threaten the very basis of the relationship, its past or its future.

Notably absent from this richly gendered and familial imagery are references to sexuality, rendering it an imagined homosocial relation. Moreover, this relationship is not portrayed as a happy marriage – as the word choice of 'shared destiny' might seem to suggest – but rather as a natural result of pre-existing and unchangeable familial ties. In other words, '(biological) brothers will be brothers' in spite of any conflict, and the conflict will be a quarrel but not depicted as a rape, as is common in depictions of the Israeli occupation of Lebanon and Palestine, for example, or other US interventions in West Asia. Therefore, even though the unequal power relationship is revealed and acknowledged, it is neutralized by the absence of a sexual dimension in its portrayal and justified through using the idea of a natural hierarchy between an older sibling and a younger one. At the same time, however, neutralization through familial hierarchies erases incest and familial rape from the realm of family relations. This erasure is not coincidental; rather, it is intentional in acknowledging only specific definitions of violence and maintaining the family as the principle structural unit.³

² The slippage between 'brotherhood' and 'fraternity' is unnoticed due to the word's shared Arabic root; however, it is informative insofar as it is read alongside the absent reference to the Umma, as it denotes a homosocial bond.

³ I thank my colleagues from the STINT workshop at the University of Western Cape for alerting me to this point.

This type of regional-relational analysis pushes us to take inter-regional power dynamics seriously as key to our understandings of gender and sexuality. By tying conceptions of normativity to ideas of kinship, homosociality, and the non-sexual, it is easy to see how conceptions of non-normativity could then include notions of foreignness and the sexual, and hence how the sexually non-normative becomes an area of punishment locally (Amar 2013). Indeed, in the same treaty described above, once the text begins to address security issues, direct references to brotherhood are dropped, and a language of internal and external state threat is adopted instead, in a form that clearly reveals the unequal positions of both states towards each other. While there is no explicit mention of sexualization, the effect is to associate the Other (in this case Syrians in Lebanon) with unwelcome invaders. A regional-relational lens would hence shed more light on the building of the concepts of normativity and non-normativity and the ways in which these notions shape the very definitions of gender and sexuality.

Re-writing the story of LGBT activism through a regional lens

As briefly explored in the introduction, scholars such as Joseph Massad view the creation of LGBT organizations in West Asia as part of the Gay International's imperialist politics. While one might think that this is only the view of one academic, it has been met with much reaction from regional activists. Lebanese activists in particular have responded to this position using various arguments. For example, Ghassan Makarem, one of the co-founders of the first LGBT rights organization in Lebanon, HELEM, argued that LGBT activists are not "Agents of the West" or mindless imitators of Western politics (Makarem 2009). Anonymous members of a Lebanese queer women's group also addressed this debate in a collection of stories entitled *Bareed Mista3jil*. They argued that the transnational term 'queer' represents their politics more accurately than 'LGBT' acronyms, and that homosexuality in the region can be found in much of 7th century erotic poetry, hence proving its local existence across time and not its imposition by the West (Meem 2009). Both activist responses continue to inform the debate over the sexual as one between an impositional imperialist West and a local authentic practice that I reviewed earlier.

However, we can complicate this debate if we consider the story of LGBT activism as not simply part of the Gay International, nor as only an extension of 7th-century erotic sensibilities. The impulse to formally organize into a group advocating for sexual freedoms in Beirut was triggered by two critical regional events. The first was the perceived increase in repression in Lebanon, which, according to my interlocutors, included a proposal at the governmental level that would further broaden Lebanon's anti-homosexuality law to include homosexual love relations and not only the act of penetration. Such a law would effectively have moved beyond penalizing an 'act' to penalizing a sexual orientation or practice, and hence punishing a type of person. Secondly, the Queen Boat raid in Cairo in 2001, in which over 50 Egyptian men were arrested and tried in military court, was perceived as a very threatening precedent for various leftist activists in Beirut (Makarem 2011). These two events pushed activists to create a new group specifically for non-normative sexual politics and to begin organizing regionally.

Additional regional events contributed to HELEM's and other activist groups' growth and public engagement with sexuality as a political issue. For example, during the US military occupation of Iraq from 2003 onwards, a wave of organized murder campaigns against feminine men in the country led many to flee and seek refuge in Lebanon, pushing the activists to engage transnational humanitarian funding to which they have access to assist them (HRW 2009). Likewise, frequent moral panics in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and elsewhere around so-called 'masculinized women', or 'boyat' (from 'boy'), were debated in queer women's activist circles to reach a better understanding of the phenomenon and its (in)applicability to the Lebanese context. Therefore, such regional events and relations with neighbouring countries profoundly inform the politics of gender and sexuality through (re)defining (non)-normativity, the role of armed conflict in perpetuating violence against gender and sexual difference, and the post-colonial state's role in defining internal others (Amar 2013). Hence, it is clear that adopting a regional framework of analysis that centralizes regional relations can greatly enrich our understanding of the reproduction of gendered non-normative sexualities and their politics in West Asia. Chiefly, it can tell a different story about desire than only the debate between imperial imposition and local authenticity. Instead, a new story emerges about gender and sexual non-normativity

becoming an area of state intervention and punishment, and about a cross-regional activist response.

Conclusion

My analysis pushes us towards a more systemic exploration of the role of the regional scale as a central tenet for informing gender and sexuality, in West Asia and beyond. Adding the third pillar of 'the regional' helps us to complicate the boundaries between the local and the global, and the story of the imperialist and transnational travel of concepts and politics. A regional perspective is more effective in revealing the permeability of these conceptual boundaries, while also moving us away from seeing their interaction as only vertical or horizontal. Rather, we can imagine the regional as a three-dimensional wave, vibrating across the horizontal while also shifting up and down the vertical. Therefore, what I have proposed is that, instead of analysing sexual politics and gender relations in West Asia as solely an interaction between imperialist channels of transfer from the North and West to the South and East, or as new arrivals on a map of porous transnational analysis that still refers back to the empire in order to make sense of itself, or even as pure manifestations of local and trans-historical sexuality, we should aim our analytical gaze elsewhere. Rather than focusing on the Gay International in writing about sexuality politics in Lebanon and West Asia, we should examine regional events that inform contemporary lived realities. For example, we should be looking at emerging regional conversations in spaces such as Nadwe; a semi-above-ground annual feminist and 'Queer' conference and series of events that brings together activists from West Asia and North Africa to build a joint cross-regional politics. These conversations from and about the people navigating the politics of gender and sexuality can offer a very different perspective and challenge the concepts with which we work in academia.

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