

Everyday Intimacies of the Middle East

ASLI ZENGIN and SERTAÇ SEHLIKOĞLU

In the last decade the question of intimacy in the Middle East has received renewed scholarly attention in its relation to love, sentimentality, sexuality, gender, and erotics (Mahdavi 2009; Najmabadi 2005; Ozyegin 2015; Peirce 2010; Pursley 2012). This research has greatly contributed to understanding the role of distinctive historical and social processes and transformations in constructing the realms of intimacy. We suggest that the question of intimacy and its relation to the everyday domains of life requires further attention. How people, bodies, and objects meet and touch—and the zones of contact that they create (Pratt and Rosner 2006, 17) in the everyday life of publics, institutions, and families—are critical issues to further examine.

This special issue aims to contribute to studies of intimacy first from an area studies perspective and second from a theoretical standpoint. Regarding the first goal, the authors in this volume explore how multiple domains and forms of intimacies are defined, shaped, constructed, and transformed across the cultural and social worlds of the Middle East. Two historians, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) and Dror Ze'evi (2006), have made key theoretical contributions to the notion of intimacy in the Middle East. Their work has inspired this special issue in two ways. First, they trace links between the overarching structural conditions that individuals operate in (religion, state, family, kinship) and the historical trajectories of norms and their regulation. Second, Najmabadi's and Ze'evi's works emphasize the interactive and intersubjective registers of intimacies in the Middle East. They do so by carefully examining and emphasizing that cross gender dynamics in different parts of the region and at different historical moments of change. How should we calibrate these changes in a time of rapid transition? Focusing on everyday definitions,

circulations, constructions, and transformations of intimacies in Egypt, Turkey, and Israel, the articles in this issue engage with this question.

The second goal of this special issue is to explore and interrogate the analytic, theoretical, and political work intimacy does and promises as a concept. What do we mean by intimacy; what does it hold for our individual and social lives; and what kinds of social, political, and economic possibilities does intimacy create? In seeking to address these questions, this issue discusses intimacy as a concept that is multiple in its formation, circulation, and organization. We suggest that intimacy is integral to the formation of what is called “the human”—selves, subjectivities, communities, publics, collectives, and socialities. We also examine the close relationship between intimacy and power, violence, sex, sexuality, gender, domesticity, embodiment, relatedness, commodification, and spatial production and organization. These domains and their related social actors construct, privilege, and deconstruct specific intimate worlds and intimacies.

Intimacy, as an analytic concept, interrogates and transgresses established understandings of private and public domains, highlighting how such notions nurture intimacy itself. For us, the private is always “mediated by publics” (Berlant and Warner 1998, 547), and therefore notions, languages, and constructs of intimacy are always already public. Discourses and practices of intimacy are important means of mediating between the private and the public but even more broadly between different socialities, spaces, and geographies. This volume takes up the idea of intimacy as a form of mediation and investigates what forms of intimacy may be identified in relation to and beyond the domains of sex, sexuality, domesticity, and familiarity.

This collection engages with scholarship on the exercise and organization of intimate state power (Aretxaga 2003; Hoodfar 1997; Joseph 1993; Mir-Hosseini 1993; Povinelli 2006; Stoler 2002). The primary domains of this (political) socialization range from regulations related to marriage, childbearing and child rearing, and reproductive health and sexual life to assumptions and expectations about gender identity and its related behaviors and embodiments. With the implementation of legal strategies and regulatory practices, the so-called sphere of the private emerges as a locus of evolving forms of state power that determines the intimacies (sexual, domestic, and family relations) that are legitimate (Kandiyoti 1991; Parla 2001). Referring to these discussions, we analyze the forms of state power that operate through the establishment of intimate and sexual links to the lives and bodies of its individual citizens.

Without question, intimacies are also formed beyond local and national contexts. As we stress in this issue, the role of transnational processes in shaping existing forms of intimacy and producing new ones necessitates special attention. The dramatic increase in the extent of connectedness between people through

communication technologies, economic exchanges, and forms of mobility calls for a transnational perspective to understand the novel forms intimacy takes.

Overall, each piece in this collection presents a context-specific discussion of how legal, economic, and political regulations and practices promote a social environment in which certain intimate bonds are stigmatized, sanctioned, or dissolved while others are encouraged. We hope this volume will trigger further discussion on theoretical formulations and regional understandings of intimacy.

ASLI ZENGİN is an anthropologist and postdoctoral fellow in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program at Brandeis University. Zengin has widely published in peer-reviewed journals, including *Anthropologica* and *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, and edited volumes. Contact: a.zengin@gmail.com.

SERTAÇ SEHLİKOĞLU is a social anthropologist at the University of Cambridge. Her work has been published in edited collections and in such peer-reviewed journals as the *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, *Feminist Media Studies*, the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, and *Leisure Studies*. Contact: ss935@cam.ac.uk.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Division of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and Newnham College of Cambridge for their financial support of the workshop on intimacy that we organized with Marlene Schäfers at the University of Cambridge in May 2014. This special issue is composed of the papers selected for and discussed during this workshop.

References

- Aretxaga, Begona. 2003. "Maddening States." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 393–410.
- Berlant, Lauren, and Michael Warner. 1998. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2: 547–66.
- Hoodfar, Homa. 1997. *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Joseph, Suad. 1993. "Connectivity and Patriarchy among Urban Working-class Arab Families in Lebanon." *Ethos* 21, no. 4: 452–84.
- Kandiyoti, Deniz. 1991. *Women, Islam, and the State*. Philadelphia: Macmillan.
- Mahdavi, Pardis. 2009. *Passionate Uprisings: Iran's Sexual Revolution*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 1993. *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law in Iran and Morocco*. London: Tauris.
- Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 2005. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ozyegin, Gul. 2015. *New Desires, New Selves: Sex, Love, and Piety among Turkish Youth*. New York: New York University Press.
- Parla, Ayse. 2001. "The 'Honor' of the State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey." *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1: 65–88.

- Peirce, Leslie. 2010. "Domesticating Sexuality: Harem Culture in Ottoman Imperial Law." In *Harem Histories: Envisioning Places and Living Spaces*, edited by Marilyn Booth, 104–35. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2006. *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pratt, Geraldine, and Victoria Rosner. 2006. "Introduction: The Global and the Intimate." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 34, nos. 1–2: 13–24.
- Pursley, Sara. 2012. "Daughters of the Right Path: Family Law, Homosocial Publics, and the Ethics of Intimacy in the Works of Shi'i Revivalist Bint Al-Huda." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 2: 51–77.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ze'evi, Dror. 2006. *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

