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Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Re-Orienting Desire:

The Gay International and the Arab World

One of the more compelling issues to emerge out of the gay movement in the last two decades is the universalization of "gay rights." This project has appropriated the prevailing U.S. discourse on human rights in order to launch itself on an international scale. Following in the footsteps of the white Western women's movement, which had sought to universalize its issues through imposing its own colonial feminism on the women's movements in the non-Western world—a situation that led to major schisms from the outset—the gay movement has adopted a similar missionary role. Organizations dominated by white Western males (the International Lesbian and Gay Association [ILGA] and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission [IGLHRC]) sprang up to defend the rights of "gays and lesbians" all over the world and to advocate on their behalf. ILGA, which was founded in 1978 at the height of the Carter administration's human rights campaign against the Soviet Union and Third World enemies, asserts that one of its aims is to "create a platform for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people internationally, in their quest for recognition, equality, and liberation, in particular through the world and regional conferences."¹ **[End Page 361]** As for IGLHRC, which was founded in 1991, its mission is to "protect and advance the human rights of all people and communities subject to discrimination or abuse on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status."² It is these missionary tasks, the discourse that produces them, and the organizations that represent them that constitute what I call the *Gay International*.

Like the major U.S.-based human rights groups (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and many white Western feminist organizations, the Gay International has reserved a special place for the Muslim world in both its discourse and its advocacy. This orientalist impulse, borrowed from predominant representations of the Arab and Muslim worlds in the United States and Europe, continues to guide all branches of the human rights community. As a relative late comer to this assimilationist project, the Gay International has had to catch up quickly. To do so, supporters of the Gay International's missionary tasks have produced two kinds of literature on the Muslim world: an academic literature of historical, literary, and anthropological accounts, written mostly by white male European or American gay scholars, which purport to describe and explain "homosexuality" in the past and present of the Arab and Muslim worlds; and journalistic accounts of the lives of so-called gays and (much less so) lesbians in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds.³ The former seeks to unravel the mystery of Islam to a Western audience, whereas the latter aims to inform white gay sex-tourists about the region. The larger mission, as I describe below, is to liberate Arab and Muslim "gays and lesbians" from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay. The following remarks may be taken as typical. Lisa Power, co-secretary general of ILGA, states that "most Islamic cultures don't take kindly to organized homosexuality, even though male homoeroticism is deep within their cultural roots! . . . most people are too nervous to organize, even in countries with a high level of homosexuality."⁴ Robert **[End Page 362]** Bray, public information director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and an officer of ILGA, understands that "cultural differences make the definition and the shading of homosexuality different among peoples. . . . But I see the real question as one of sexual freedom; and sexual freedom transcends cultures." Describing his adventures in Morocco and southern Spain, Bray states that "at least one guy expressed a longing to just be gay and not have to live within the prescribed sexual behaviors, and he said that there were others like him." Seemingly convinced by this one conversation, Bray declares: "I believe...

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Mervat Hatem has urged me to write this article for over ten years, while Neville Hoad has urged me to write it for seven. I thank them both for continuing to push me and hope that they are not disappointed with the outcome. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Sawyer Seminar conference *Hatred: Confronting the Other*, held at the University of Chicago on 12 February 2000. I thank Elizabeth A. Povinelli for inviting me to participate.

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