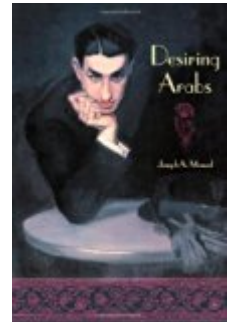


Joseph Andoni Massad. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
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Reviewed by Wilson C. Jacob

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With *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad makes a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on sexuality. He merits praise for boldly tackling the problematic of knowledge in a world that continues to be unevenly carved up along political, economic, and military lines—lines which are viscerally felt in the Middle East. His struggle to expose the historical formation of what are taken to be natural forms—sex, desire, and identity—and the politics surrounding them through a mapping of points made about deviations from their modern norms is at once exhilarating and frustrating. The breadth of the "archive" assembled in his work is truly dazzling while the argument imposed on this expansive collection is ultimately unsatisfying. *Desiring Arabs* is a work of retrieval and of critique. It describes an emerging field of sexuality even as it disavows it. The discursive renderings of the Arab and of desire are cast as historical but they recursively appear as flawed portrayals, evoking the presence of an immanent truth only known to the author but never fully divulged.[1]

Centered around a previously published article on the discursive and political effects of international gay human rights activism (the "Gay International"), the book begins by tracing intellectual engagements in and about the "Arab world" concerning the question of sex from the nineteenth century to the present.[2] The sources are tremendously varied in terms of genre (historical, literary critical, journalistic, fictional, theological, and medical) but they are for the most part, and intentionally so, self-consciously interpretive works. (Whether or not they all self-consciously locate themselves outside of the object they interpret is a question that remains.) Massad is to be commended for his erudition, which is amply demonstrated in the explication of such a wide array of texts, the nature of which even takes him on occasional forays into the thicket of the voluminous medieval corpus in order to correct the misreadings of modern commentators. It is for this reason—the spectacular breadth of the work—that following a brief outline of the chapters I will focus primarily on Massad's historical argument

and its value for critique. In engaging these, I suggest a different periodization, recognizing that sexual deviance circulated discursively prior to the late twentieth century. From there I will argue that history's relationship to critique must be further nuanced in order to elaborate the problem of the Arab subject as a discursive formation. Finally, I consider Massad's archive of desire and the Gay International in relation to other possible histories, subjects, and futures.

The book's substantial introduction treats how the emergence of "civilization" and "culture" as new objects of concern in the West--and, through colonialism, everywhere else--was freighted with the burden of a new temporality marked by an evolutionary conception of progress, wherein a new hierarchy of moderns and non-moderns was negotiated. The remainder of the book attends to how *the Arab* past became a figure of Orientalist musings in the West and modernist aspirations in the East, both of which displayed a strong interest in the sexual desires of the Arabs.

Chapters 1 and 2 treat the question of sex from its emergence in the late-nineteenth-century Arab *nahda* (renaissance) through its proliferation in the 1970s. Chapter 1 traces the long and varied process of sanitization by authors with diverse ideological leanings who engaged with the legacy of the eighth-century poet Abu Nuwas, who was a master of poetry valorizing the love of boys and a generally "bawdy" lifestyle. Chapter 2 expands the focus on sex to texts engaging what became circumscribed as an Arab-Islamic tradition. These interpretive exercises were part of a broader, "liberatory" project of elaborating a distinctively Arab culture and civilization, which was an "incitement to discourse" that took place in opposition to the (neo)colonial missions of Western powers in the region and of their scholars at home.

Chapter 3 jumps to the present to delineate what is at stake when intellectuals and activists

uncritically deploy essentialist categories of identity across cultural boundaries without appreciating the ways in which the latter were drawn and how they shaped notions of sexual difference. Chapter 4 further explores the implications of the incitement to discourse about sexuality since the 1980s, considering the growing Islamist interest in sexual deviance as a source of "sin, crime, and disease." It also points to the more limited secular response which in its own way veered in a conservative direction. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the changing treatment of sexual deviance in Arabic novels, short stories, and one play, from the end of World War II to the present. The work ends with a plea for similar critique that unsettles Western and Arab orthodoxies about sexual desire in order to clear space for and make possible "different conceptions of desires, politics, and subjectivities" (p. 418).

Massad seeks to cast out the stubbornly persistent Orientalist conception of civilizational progress and the attendant conclusions about cultural difference that have made way for colonial and later humanitarian interventions: an admirable, timely, and important project. Yet it is questionable whether his counter-genealogy of Arab desire re-describes the object and whether this newly constituted archive is an opening onto new vistas (and for whom). In spite of its stated intentions, *Desiring Arabs* employs a methodology that forces it to repeat some of the terms of colonial modernity it seeks to displace.

Eschewing anthropological accounts, Massad's methodology comes from the history of ideas, particularly in his reading of fiction, which is indebted to Foucaultian and post-structuralist modes (p. 271). Throughout the work Massad makes clear that efforts to represent Arab culture and sexual practices tend to presuppose essentialist categories of identity uncritically reproduced from the colonial-Orientalist episteme. Informed by Edward Said, Massad deconstructs that Arab subject which has been the product of a colonial

modernity, articulated through a division of the world into West and East. However, even as the work shows that these geographical and civilizational projections are historically constructed, the dichotomy operates throughout Massad's own argument as he meticulously charts the discursive difference of the desiring Arab subject. On the one hand, this is intentional given the political claims he wishes to defend, that this nineteenth-century projection of the advanced/progressive West and backwards/despotic East continues to legitimize imperialist actions and incites reactionary discourses—claims this reviewer thinks he supports successfully. On the other hand, this is a result of the more problematic temporal claims about turning points Massad is forced to make because of the political argument. The latter is problematic not only as far as historical knowledge is concerned but also in terms of critique.

Despite the impressive archive Massad has assembled, the work he wishes it to perform requires further spadework in other archives. The exclusive focus on elite texts limits the perspective of the author. While inevitable in any work of representation, it ultimately misleads him into drawing conclusions about epistemological breaks that do not correspond to our knowledge of other sources from this period. The backbone of this book is an argument about sexual deviance, mapped off of the growing body of works constituting an Arab cultural canon and ostensibly an Arab subject. Massad contends that the notion of deviance was largely absent from the emerging discourse on sex before the 1980s, the moment of the rise and internationalization of Western gay liberation movements and the AIDS pandemic. “Locally” this stemmed from the soul-searching following the humiliating Arab defeat by Israel in 1967, giving rise to Islamism and with it an ostensibly new epistemology of sexual alterity geared towards repression rather than liberation.

As often with such broad-reaching arguments, the hints of another periodization, and consequently another set of causations, are given in the work itself. It is a testament to Massad's careful reading that an alternative itinerary for the deviant subject is implicitly traced, evidenced in his discussion of Salama Musa's writings on sex, desire, and deviance from the mid-1920s through the 1950s (pp. 128-141). Even though he notes the availability of Musa's works in all of the major Arab cities, he assigns to an exceptional status his interest in sex as it was practiced when he wrote and its implications for the individual and society. Such an extensive engagement as well as its broad circulation signal the presence of a public culture of sexual discourse that surpassed “recovering civilizational memory for use in the present” (p. 100). By the late 1920s, sexual deviance had become a regular topic of cultural criticism, marshalling the opinions of doctors, journalists, fiction writers, and significantly, enthusiasts of the physical culture movement.[3] This is demonstrated in a wide array of sources—from newspapers, magazines, and pulp novels to police and court records. In this history, colonial modernity does not appear uniquely as a question of East and West but as a process of normalization through various disciplinary technologies, which gave rise to a global modern subject imbued with common cultural and material horizons. There were “local” iterations but only because there was a global form against and through which to identify; East-West was merely one of several axes along which the terms of the modern subject was reiterated.

The nineteenth-century transformations, which made the *nahda* and subsequent cultural interventions possible, included not only a fundamental shift in the balance of global power towards the north Atlantic but a structural emergence that made the world one of “unavoidable” connections. Universals were not possible apart from that new world; to that extent, the history of “woman,” for example, could be mapped as an

imperialist projection with a particular valence *and* as a general apparatus of subject formation that brought new political possibilities even as it constrained or foreclosed others—but it was never a zero-sum game. In other words, colonialism from its inception encompassed the entire world and through the nineteenth century enabled the emergence of a global modern and its subject. This might have appeared more readily if the debates about sexual deviance of concern to Massad were not limited almost exclusively to the desires of men for other men. If the problem of desire in colonial modernity were posed as the question of securing the world for a bourgeois culture rather than in terms of a division of the world into East and West, then a much more textured history of deviations from the norm would be materialized.

This history had already started to be written before Massad published *Desiring Arabs* by social and cultural historians working on the question of woman.[4] In the Middle Eastern context, it is through the late-nineteenth-century debates about women that sexual deviance first becomes intelligible. Massad glosses over this crucial point with a reference to Qasim Amin but without a single reference to the substantial historiography, which is perhaps what allows him to declare: “But unlike Amin’s discussion of the sexual desires and conduct of contemporary Arabs and Muslims, the next century would witness a debate not necessarily about the sexual life of contemporary Arabs (although occasionally it would), but mainly about the sexual life of the ancient Arabs” (p. 57). In fact Amin’s work sparked a fierce debate about contemporary women’s roles, dress, gender segregation, sex, marriage, and miscegenation which continued to develop in the press into the 1920s and formed the context within which the problems of masculinity, including masturbation and same-sex sex, were dissected. In Egypt, biological reproduction and the care of the body became problems for reformers and critics with which to think through their new social position as an emergent middle class and as a political body ambivalently

and tenuously located between “the people” and the sovereign.

By limiting the scope of “ideas” about sex to deviance and then narrowing deviance to sex between men and/or homosexuality, Massad has narrowed the scope of critique, of the possibility to think differently, and of the possibilities for ethical action. By rendering history as a deconstruction—or debunking—of ideas about sex and desire that reproduce an Orientalist paradigm, the book fetters history’s potential for the radical critique of essentialisms and grand narratives. The mere reversal of their strategies of inscription cannot proliferate difference. In other words, the frustrating aspect of *Desiring Arabs* is the potential it forecloses by stopping short of enabling the majority of the texts it analyzes to say anything more. Massad assembles an archival catalogue and his work is justifiable on that level; however he falls short of his stated aim of using that archive to make an opening for other future possibilities.

It is perhaps in the argument about the Gay International that the book is both made and unmade. The mapping of an increasingly globalized human rights politics through the rise of international gay rights activism problematizes the latter as a re-inscription of the colonial-Orientalist dichotomy of East and West. That activism now also projects a new binary between heterosexual and homosexual, forcing a choice between the two. To that end, chapters 3 through 6 successfully demonstrate the powerful workings of colonial discourse to (re)shape cultural fields and subjective possibilities. However, one is left to wonder whether that political critique exhausts the cultural fields and the sexual subjects produced therein, since the author provides no evidence about everyday practices. Since Massad considers anthropological evidence corrupted, his references to nineteenth-century texts and negative critique leave one to assume that a medieval sexual landscape, marked by the absence of identities

attached to sexual practices or object choices, thrived in the Arab world until the late twentieth century. Whether gays and lesbians are merely effects of the Gay International or of a much more diffuse and changing set of discursive, material, and bio-political apparatuses traversing the world remains an unknown, despite Massad's confident assertions about the former. Hence, historical knowledge about how sex was rethought and sexuality newly conceptualized in the Middle East during the crucial period of 1890 to 1940, along with anthropological knowledge about the everyday sexual practices of people in the "West" and the "East," would shed light on the complex formations of identity made (im)possible by the terms of modern life.

More importantly, only research that poses specific questions without obvious answers can potentially illuminate the contours of ethical action even within political contexts that seem "compromised." The dismissal of a complex political formation as the "Gay International" cannot not miss the possibilities of queer identification that defy the binary logic attending a specific genealogy of sexuality, whether in the "West" or the "East" or more likely across those imagined divisions. It is in those liminal subjectivities and emergent alliances that a positive history of futures past may be located and futures present reimagined. Any critical intervention that seeks "to resist the attempts by a number of forces to *determine and script* that future a priori," must do more than excavate an archive of desire in which that desire is always already defective (p. 417). *Desiring Arabs* launches a salvo aimed at ridding the Arab cultural canon (consciousness?) of demons that plague its ability to produce a postcolonial subject unfettered by a putatively Western temporality; however, in the end it becomes a text haunted by those very same demons it sought to cast out, whereby the modern for the Arab subject remains an otherworldly site of desire which can

never quite be materialized except as its other in some "undetermined future yet to come" (p. 417).

Notes

[1]. While critical of the book, I feel it is necessary to point out, given the current and past climate of censorship accompanying the politicized attacks on the author's scholarship, that this review is written from a position sympathetic to what the author has tried to accomplish and does not share in any way the spirit or the politics of those for whom a genuine intellectual engagement is feared. Indeed, it is only because the work is rich in its scholarship that this review is possible.

[2]. Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 361-385.

[3]. See Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

[4]. The works are too many to cite in full here, but for examples from the Arab Middle East, see Judith Tucker, Margot Badran, Hoda al-Sadda, Beth Baron, Marilyn Booth, Lisa Pollard, Elizabeth Thompson, Hibba Abugideiri, Omnia El Shakry, and Hanan Kholoussy.

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