



***Desiring Arabs* by Joseph Massad. Chicago and London:
The University of Chicago Press, 2007.**

Review by Stephanie Tara Schwartz

January 2009. In *Desiring Arabs*, Joseph Massad aims to compile an archive of modern Arab writing on sexuality in the Arab world and examine it in reference to Edward Said's notion of Orientalism. Massad argues that Orientalist ideas of culture and civilization, specifically in regards to sexuality, have been hegemonic in Arab writers' representation of themselves from the Arab Renaissance in the 19th century to the present. The strength of Massad's work is that, following Said, he examines diverse forms of literature contrapuntally. Examining Arab fiction and non-fiction in the same discursive field, Massad reveals an incorporation of Orientalist ideas when it comes to what types of subjects constitute civilizational/cultural progress and which are to be considered deviant and backwards.

Chapter 1 raises the interesting question of what pedagogical role the past should play in the present. Massad successfully demonstrates how writers in the 1900-1950s such as Jurji Zaydan and Taha Husayn sought to moralize or censor parts of Arab history that did not mesh with European ideas of civilization. The Orientalist influence of this moralizing is made explicit by Massad in his example of how it became popular in Arab discourse to other Abbasid "decadence" (specifically sexual relations between elite men and young boys) by attributing its origin to the Persians, rather than authorizing these practices as "Arab," a popular argument in Orientalist writing. (83, 108)

The following chapter looks at Arab writing on the history of Arab "civilization" and sexual desires. Here Massad shows how writers as diverse as liberal nationalist al-Munajjid, Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb and feminist writer Nawal al-Sa'dawi all share the same European commitment to a civilizational model of conceiving history, i.e. a telos of progress where Arab civilization is considered "backwards" vis-à-vis Europe. The civilizational anxiety discussed in Chapter 1 produced a discourse about the nature of medieval and even pre-Islamic society's sexuality. These chapters make evident the project by modern Arab writers to excavate pieces of the past and reconstruct them to inform various political agendas – nationalist, Islamic, feminist – in the present. Massad contributes a vivid depiction of how the telling of Arab history has been manipulated according to pedagogical agendas of modern Arab intellectuals; the obsession with defending or condemning the poet Abu Nuwas by explaining away or making accusations about his perceived sexuality stands out here.

While Chapters 1 and 2 deal with intellectual and political developments within the Arab World around the idea of Arab civilization, Chapter 3 discusses the impact of Western

human rights discourse (a trend Massad terms “The Gay International”) on Arab discourses on sexuality. Chapter 4 deals with the Arab intellectual reaction to this discourse. Massad’s central argument in this section, which is also one of the central arguments in the book, is that “In contradistinction to the liberatory claims made by the Gay International in relation to what it posits as an always already homosexual population...it is the very discourse of the Gay International, which both produces homosexuals as well as gays and lesbians, where they do not exist and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology.” (162-163) Further, the reification of these categories has material consequences for the subjects they label. This argument makes the valuable claim that one must always question the categories used to produce truth claims about groups or individuals in society. Massad is right to call attention to the need to interrogate Western epistemology when applied to Arab contexts. However, he assumes that the epistemology of gay rights is unidirectional and monolithic. Drawing on Foucault’s method of studying dividing practices and scientific classification in the creation of the homosexual subject, he offers no discussion of subjectification – how or why Arabs might seek to affiliate with Western gay rights movements; he simply denounces these categories as imperialist imposition.

This argument is carried into the final two chapters of the book, which detail how sexual practices are represented in fiction. Massad’s goal here is to present how authors including Naguib Mahfouz and Sun’allah Ibrahim not only represent sexual desire in their novels, especially “deviant” sexuality, but employ it as allegory for social critique. He argues in Chapter 6 that starting in the 1980s, the problem of Arab degeneration is made explicit and begins to take on a Western epistemology and taxonomy of desire. This manifests in the example of Sa’dallah Wannus’1994 play “*The Rites of Signs and Transformations*” [English title]. Here the macho character al-‘Afsah outs himself to his community and, rather than finding his love for ‘Abbas reciprocated, is rejected by his beloved and becomes a public outrage resulting in his committing suicide. (366) Massad argues that al-‘Afsah and Wannus follow the Gay International attempt to obliterate private space by asserting sexual desires in public and demanding public rights for sexual identities. Furthermore Massad argues that since prostitution was left mostly unmolested by state and clerics, and since “illicit” sexual desires were generally tolerated by society, it is the Western insistence on obliterating the division between public and private as a route to liberation that resulted in the state’s targeting of these “deviant” individuals. This argument is troubling because it again idealizes the private world of Arab sexuality without interrogating why individuals might seek to identify with Western taxonomies. Even if society tolerates sexuality in private, it does not follow that oppression is absent from these private spaces and that Western liberation discourse would not offer a new language for confronting oppression, especially given globalization and the diasporic contact between Arabs and the West.

In *Desiring Arabs* Massad excels at drawing extensively from a diverse array of Arab writing on Arab sexuality. His monograph proves that sexuality has been a lively subject of discussion for modern Arab thinkers. It is a well-structured work that is enlightening

and enjoyable to read and serves as a trigger for further discussion on the controversial arguments it raises.

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