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Review

# Arab Sexualities

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**THE ISSUE OF same-sex sexualities in the Arab world is a political and intellectual minefield, and more so since 9/11 than before. In a bizarre twist, neoconservatives and other rightists who were hostile for decades to the lesbian/gay movement(1) have repackaged themselves as defenders of oppressed Arab women and gays. Responses from the left have been divided.**

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### **Desiring Arabs**

*Desiring Arabs*

by Joseph A. Massad

Chicago: University of Chicago Press,

444 pages, \$35 hardcover.

When international human rights or LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) groups have issued alerts lately about persecution of Middle Eastern LGBT people (most often in Iran), some anti-imperialist gays have denounced the critics for contributing to the Republicans' (and some prominent Democrats') war drive. Others, closer to the politics of Against the Current, have insisted on the importance both of opposition to U.S. intervention and of solidarity with LGBTs.

The arguments have rarely shown much knowledge of the sexual cultures of the Arab world, however, or included much analysis of how imperialism and sexuality interact. Overcoming this lack of understanding is a crucial and urgent task.

The right's reliance on arguments about women's and sexual freedom makes it increasingly difficult to be an anti-imperialist or antiracist in the United States without integrating gender and sexual analysis. Similarly, international feminist and LGBT movements are hamstrung by their relative weakness in and ignorance of the Arab world. They badly need to take up the task of linking imperialism, gender and sexuality.

This task is not made any easier by the paucity of serious scholarship on sexualities in the Arab world. Lesbian/gay studies has focused mostly on modern Europe and North America. Fortunately more work has been done in recent years on dependent-world LGBTs. But Africa and the Middle East are the parts of the world where LGBT communities are least visible and LGBT movements most harshly repressed.

This helps explain why scholarship on Arab same-sex sexualities has been relatively thin on the ground. People outside the Arab world, who often don't know it well or even speak Arabic, have published most of what exists in English. While academics in North America and Europe have many times more resources, the knowledge and experience of researchers in and from the Arab world are indispensable.

Joseph Massad, an associate professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University, has now walked out boldly into this minefield with his book *Desiring Arabs*. Massad is no stranger to controversy. His earlier work concentrated on Jordan and Palestine, not exactly fields where calm, collegial discussion is the rule in U.S. academe - least of all at Columbia, a hotbed of right-wing Zionist hate campaigns of which Massad has been a prime target. Naturally and rightly, the left and defenders of Palestinian rights have come to his defense.

Desiring Arabs has brought Massad a new crowd of detractors. His criticisms of North American and European efforts to identify, defend and free gay people in Arab countries(2) have been met with a wave of accusations. An online review of Desiring Arabs by a staff member of The New Republic, after describing police torture of a Palestinian gay man in graphic detail, charged Massad with an "insidious attempt to convince the world that men like [this one] are somehow figments of the Western world's imagination."(3)

Another review by Brian Whitaker, former Middle East editor of the London Guardian, accused Massad of reflecting "essentially the same ideas" as the Jordanian Islamic Action Front when it denounced women's rights as an "American and Zionist" attack on the nation's "identity and values."(4) These are excerpts from the relatively nuanced attacks; other diatribes on the net have been more scurrilous.

## No Homophobe

Massad is clearly no homophobe and has no sympathy with torturers or fundamentalists. On the contrary, Desiring Arabs is an important resource for serious students of sexualities in the Arab world. It confirms that same-sex sexual desire and behavior were widespread in Arabic literature during the centuries when Arab civilization was at its height.

Above all, the book does a service to scholarship comparable to what Kate Millett did in *Sexual Politics* or Dennis Altman in *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*: it analyses the sexual ideologies of a wide range of 19th- and 20th-century literary works, many of them inaccessible to non-Arabic speakers. In the process Massad shows respect for and familiarity with queer theory, the dominant current today in LGBT studies.

For all its merits, however, Desiring Arabs has major flaws. Like many queer theorists, Massad seems more interested in literature than in reality. He leaves crucial questions about Arabs' sexual behavior and identities not only unanswered - answers admittedly hard to come by in countries where mass surveys or in-depth interviews about sexuality are rarely feasible - but largely unaddressed.

While his criticisms of activists' and academics' Eurocentrism are often justified, he seems to suggest that the international lesbian/gay rights movement is largely to blame for the persecution of people engaged in same-sex sexualities in the Middle East today. Yet his own research shows that this persecution predated international LGBT activism by many decades.

Massad rightly rejects many lesbians and gays' essentialism ("we were born this way" and "we are everywhere"). However, he does not engage seriously enough with the more substantial scholarly work that has been done on global same-sex sexualities. As a result, he doesn't recognize that LGBT studies have not always shared the essentialist impulses of many ordinary LGBT people. On the contrary, many theorists have emphasized that same-sex sexualities have been socially constructed in the course of history, and that these sexualities were and are extraordinarily diverse in different parts of the world.

Edward Said warned in his classic book *Orientalism* against notions that "there is such a thing as a real or true Orient (Islam, Arab or whatever)" or "that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants."(5) Massad describes Said not only as "a mentor, a friend, and a colleague" but also as "a surrogate father" (xiii) and seems to heed Said's warning when he writes, "My point here is not to argue in favor of non-Western nativism and of some blissful existence prior to the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the non-West." (42)

Nonetheless, his book tends to idealize the indigenous sexual culture of the Arab world. He repeatedly dismisses

signs of lesbian or gay life in the Arab world as outside impositions, fabrications or shameful attempts by Arabs to mimic Europeans or Americans. He fails to come to terms with the reality that the Arab world too is increasingly part of a global capitalist order and that its contemporary sexualities are likely to be hybrid and diverse.

# Beyond Gay and Straight

On one central issue Massad is right: his insistence that traditional Arab sexualities were not based on a "hetero-homo binary." (40) This will be a difficult point for many U.S. readers to grasp, given how deeply the division between "gay people" and "straight people" has shaped our common-sense understanding of sexuality. Most scholars agree, however, that this binary conception is a fairly recent development, and that there have been innumerable other ways of conceiving sexuality.

Massad's reading of the Koran, later Islamic religious texts and medieval Arabic love poetry confirms what other historians have found: that Arabs in the first centuries of Islam simply did not classify human beings in this way. It is less clear how much continuity there is between this traditional Arab sexual culture and the sexual culture of the contemporary Arab world.

Despite Massad's skepticism, there are self-identified lesbians and gay men in the Arab world today. But distinctive lesbian/gay identities as they exist in North America and Europe do seem less visible in Arab countries than in most other regions. Many Arab men who have sex with other men do not identify at all as gay, transgender or even bisexual. Some of them fuck transgender or other males, concealing this sex from public knowledge; others simply have discrete sex with one another.(6)

As Massad points out, this means that the tactics that LGBT movements have used elsewhere cannot simply be imported unchanged into the Arab world. For example, in a culture where people can engage in same-sex sexual behavior without necessarily identifying as gay, it is doubtful what it means to call on them to "come out." People whose lives include both same-sex and different-sex relationships have to be free to decide when, where and how they speak up.

Massad has strong arguments for rejecting the insistence that desire is "embedded in the body [and] can only be freed in an individualist project of liberation through public confessionals" (365) - though even in the Arab world, transgender people and others do sometimes feel that their desire is embedded in their bodies.

The scholars in LGBT studies who laid the foundations for a social constructionist approach should be sensitive to the pitfalls of binary thinking. Yet as Massad shows, when it comes to the Arab world some of the most distinguished theorists can succumb to Eurocentrism. This Eurocentrism contradicts the main thrust of the history of sexuality since the 1970s. Even worse, it ignores the key lesson of 20th-century liberation struggles: that each oppressed people needs to find its own way to free itself through understanding and transforming its own unique social formation.

Massad is better at showing how Arab sexual cultures do not work and cannot be freed, however, than in analyzing how they do work and can be freed. There is still an enormous amount of work to be done before this question can be answered. Nonetheless, Massad could have benefited a bit more from analyses by other scholars.

Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe's anthology *Islamic Homosexualities*, for example, contains more useful insights than Massad allows in his passing, cutting reference to it. (170-71) A reader who knew the book only from Massad's comments would never guess that Roscoe and Murray denounce Eurocentrism and the tendency to tell the "history

of homosexuality as a progressive, even teleological, evolution from pre-modern repression, silence, and invisibility to modern visibility and sexual freedom." They even contrast the relative uniformity of modern "Western" homosexuality to the "variety, distribution, and longevity of same-sex patterns in Islamic societies."(7)

Massad barely discusses the social relations that made up classical Arab sexual culture. For example, his account of classical Arabic poetry makes clear, as others have, that boy love was an important theme for a major Abbasid poet like Abu Nuwas. But he casts little light on the dynamics of what Murray and Roscoe call "age-differentiated homosexuality," either in classical times or in the Arab world today.

He also devotes virtually no attention to another component of Arab sexual culture: transgender. Studies have shown transgender's importance as a form of same-sex sexual expression in many parts of the underdeveloped world, including Muslim countries like Pakistan and Indonesia. There is evidence from several continents that working-class and poor people in particular are more likely than middle-class people to engage in transgender relationships as opposed to lesbian/gay relationships.(8)

Transgender people have shown an impressive capacity for radical organizing and action, to the point of virtually taking over the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004. Forms of transgender have been identified in at least some Arab countries, as among the *hassas* of Morocco and *khanith* of Oman.

Yet Massad passes over the subject in virtual silence. He denounces the International Lesbian and Gay Association for saying that transvestite dancers are popular in Egypt; he comments that this was "a nineteenth-century phenomenon" and complains that time "is never factored in when the topic is Arabs and Muslims." (167) But elsewhere he mentions the popularity of female impersonators as singers in Cairo in the 1920s and '30s, and of a female impersonator on Syrian TV as late as the 1980s. (364)

Massad's snipe is one example of how he tends to substitute discussions of ideology (Is time a factor in discussing Arabs?) for discussions of reality (Is transgender still a significant phenomenon in the Arab world?).

## Empire and Culture

Imperialist domination of the Arab world is increasingly politicizing sexuality. Is Massad open to sexual politics within Arab countries, or only to a defense of Arab sexual culture against imperialism? Can Arab anti-imperialists opt for solidarity with women, transgender people and youth in their own region, with all this implies for transforming the existing sexual culture? The Islamist political movements that currently have hegemony over the oppositions to U.S.-backed regimes clearly prefer the defense of tradition - as they selectively define it. But the choice remains open.

There is neither a historical nor a logical connection between anti-imperialism and cultural nativism. The British Empire was careful not to interfere with Islamic domination of civil society in countries it ruled like Egypt and Pakistan. By contrast, Muslim Turkey's fierce resistance to colonization after the First World War and Muslim Indonesia's struggle for independence after the Second World War involved far-reaching secularization. It is no accident that Turkey and Indonesia have stronger LGBT communities and movements today than almost any Arab country.(9)

Still today in the Arab world, repressive regimes linked to imperialism use sexual repression as a cover. Many of the Arab regimes whose repression of same-sex sexuality is most notorious, like the Saudi kingdom and Egypt, are

among the closest U.S. allies in the region and among the Arab countries best integrated into the neoliberal world economic order. And U.S. right-wing lip service to lesbian/gay rights is worse than useless to LGBT Arab people.

The Shiite parties, militias and gangs that dominate Iraq today are guilty of vicious repression of people engaged in same-sex sexualities, which the U.S. occupiers have hardly lifted a finger to stop. In one incident in 2007, an Iraqi LGBT activist heard Americans talking in the next room while Iraqi police were torturing him.(10)

Massad consistently assumes that the presence of lesbian/gay identities in the Arab world is a result of European and North American cultural influence. His wide-ranging analysis of 19th- and 20th-century literature does show, as he says, that "cultural production as a whole has been marshaled, consciously and unconsciously, toward ... shaming non-Europe into assimilation." (416) But he hardly tries to make a case for cultural causes of gay identity as opposed to other factors; he only occasionally puts forward a class or economic analysis.(11)

In fact, the spread of lesbian/gay identities in the dependent world probably owes less to outside cultural influences than to social causes like mass migration to cities, more waged labor by women, higher wages, commodification of everyday life, assumption of some traditional family functions by the state, and the spread of modern medicine with its penchant for classification.(12) The relative scarcity of lesbian/gay identities in Arab countries would then be due less to weaker European and North American influence (which seems doubtful) than to factors like the region's relatively low rate of female-paid employment.

Another factor is probably what Gilbert Achcar calls "the Arab despotic exception": the fact that the United States has continued to back dictatorships in the Middle East, due to its vital economic and geopolitical interests there, rather than risk the kind of transitions to nominal democracy that it has allowed in much of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of Asia.(13) The result has been less freedom for political and social organizing, and specifically for LGBT organizing, in the Arab world.

## Repression

Massad makes clear at many points in *Desiring Arabs* that he deplores the repression of same-sex sexuality by Arab governments. What has generated most of the controversy around the book is the chapter (by far the shortest one) where he blames this repression largely on the lesbian/gay groups, human rights organizations and "discourse" that he calls the "Gay International."(14)

Speaking of the crackdown on same-sex sexual activity in Egypt following the 2001 Queen Boat raid, for example, Massad says, "The Gay International and its activities are largely responsible for the intensity of this repressive campaign." (184)

"By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary," he says. (188) The "sexual rights agenda ... has led to much repression and oppression in the contemporary Arab world." (375) He even says that Islamic fundamentalism has an "unwitting alliance" with the "crusading Gay International in identifying people who practice certain forms of sex." (265)

The irony of this line of argument is that Massad provides so much evidence that hostility to same-sex sexualities in the Arab world long predated the arrival of LGBT movements. He describes a host of modern Arab attempts to deny, downplay or condemn traditional Arab openness to same-sex sexual desire.

He notes that erotic poetry focusing on youths or men "disappeared completely as a poetic genre" around the late 19th century. (35) He devotes almost 20 pages to 20th-century Arab critics' denunciation of the poet Abu Nuwas' praise of youthful male beauty. (76-94)

He describes a paradigm shift in the work of Egyptian Nobel Prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz, from the 1947 novel *Midaq Alley*, which portrays same-sex sexuality as commonplace but public awareness of it as shameful, to the 1957 novel *Sugar Street*, which portrays male same-sex desire as an "illness." (272-90) And he shows how Arab literature since the defeat in the 1967 war with Israel has been pervaded by images of humiliating, emasculating penetration of Arab men.

Taken as a whole, this suggests a drastic, century-long transformation of Arab sexual culture, in large measure completed before the modern lesbian/gay movement was born with the 1969 Stonewall rebellion.

European influence undoubtedly played some role in this transformation, as shown by colonial laws against "sodomy" still on the books in many former European colonies. Doubtless other factors, neglected by Massad, played a role as well, as in the case of modernizing, nationalist and Stalinist regimes elsewhere in the dependent world.(15) But protests by international LGBT and human rights groups have undoubtedly been more a reaction than a contributing factor.

The power of these organizations is derisible compared to that of the former colonial empires, the U.S. military, major multinationals or the international financial institutions. Imperialist governments have shown virtually no interest in supporting them with more than an occasional press release. Arab governments may vilify these organizations in their propaganda, but Massad provides little evidence that they have had any significant effect on law or policy, even negatively.

Furthermore, while international LGBT organizations are largely European-led and often Eurocentrist in their thinking, they are far from having a unified agenda for the Arab world, as the 2001 Egyptian Queen Boat raid showed.

For example, Act Up Paris responded to the raid with a protest at the Egyptian embassy, whose slogans included a demand to "free our lovers." This slogan would hardly have been welcomed by the Egyptian defendants, who were not defending themselves as open gay men, let alone as men with European lovers.

If this were typical of the European movement, Massad's charges would be vindicated. But in fact, at the next Euromediterranean Summer University on Homosexualities, an annual LGBT gathering in Marseille, a lone representative of Act Up Paris faced a barrage of criticism from virtually every other participant in the discussion for his group's insensitivity and counterproductive tactics.

Massad's argument becomes even less plausible when he asserts that the Egyptian police "do not seek to, and cannot if they were so inclined, arrest men practicing same-sex contact but rather are pursuing those among them who identify as 'gay.'" (183) This is the opposite of the truth: the police rarely know whether the people they harass, arrest or torture identify as gay. There is hardly a law or policy on earth that uses this as a criterion for police repression.

The sequence of cause and effect is the reverse, as historians have shown: the common experience of repression can contribute to the development of transgender, gay and lesbian identities. In any case, the dominant sexual ideology that Arab states have developed over the past century has increasingly led to repressive practices against same-sex sexual behavior, and did so before lesbian or gay identities had begun to emerge. Clearly the identities are not the cause of the repression.

# Love and Solidarity

In at least a few Arab countries, some people engaging in same-sex sexuality have begun responding to repression by assuming LGBT identities and even organizing LGBT groups. The Lebanese group Helem is one example. Interestingly, it suspended its LGBT advocacy in 2006 to turn its headquarters over to relief efforts for victims of the Israeli invasion, working with a range of other Lebanese organizations.(16)

Among Palestinians in the West Bank and pre-1967 Israel, the LGBTQ [the Q here stands for "Questioning" - ed.] group Al-Qaws has been working since 2001 "not simply to mimic an existing model of queer identity/community, but to provide a social space for LGBTQ Palestinians to independently engage in a dialogue about our own visions and ideals for a community."(17)

As Arabs engaged in same-sex sexualities begin adopting LGBT identities, they may form more lasting relationships and speak more of their love for one another. This would cast doubt on Massad's assertion that in the Arab world the goal of sexual desire is "consummation and not romantic love." (363)(18)

Contrary to conservative ideologies now gaining ground, sexuality does not require any justification in romantic love or in stable partnerships sanctified by marriage. Pleasure is its own sufficient justification. But neither should same-sex desire necessarily be limited to episodic gratification "on the side." Love too has its rights.

No one can know for sure if, when, how or in what forms Arab LGBT communities and movements will develop.(19) In particular, no one knows for sure what proportion of Arabs who have sex with people of the same sex identity as lesbian, gay, transgender or bisexual. But this is no argument against solidarity with them. Nor is it an argument for privileging those who have LGBT identities, as international movements tend to do - or those who have no such identities, as Massad does.

In the age of neoliberal globalization, power relations between colonizers - witting or unwitting - and colonized cut across LGBT movements, anti-imperialist movements and for that matter the Marxist left. The fact remains that all the victims of oppression today badly need allies in the imperialist countries, who have access to far greater resources.

Cultural sensitivity and respect for self-determination are essential. But neither should stand in the way of solidarity with the victims of repression by regimes whose vicious sexual puritanism often goes hand in hand with their subservience to an imperial agenda.

## Notes

1. Older readers may remember Midge Decter's notorious article "The Boys on the Beach," *Commentary* vol. 70 no. 3 (Sept. 1980).
2. The chapter of *Desiring Arabs* that sets out Massad's criticisms of international LGBT groups is based on his article "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* vol. 14 no. 2 (Spring 2002).
3. James Kirchick, "Queer Theory: The Columbia Professor Who Also Doesn't Think Gay People Exist in the Middle East," *The New Republic* online ([www.tnr.com](http://www.tnr.com)), Oct. 15, 2007.

4. Brian Whitaker, "Distorting Desire," Gay City News, Sept. 13, 2007.
5. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 322.
6. According to Iwan van Grinsven, *Limits to Desire: Obstacles to Gay Male Identity and Subculture Formation in Cairo, Egypt*, Nijmegen: n.p. 1997, 37, some Egyptian men speak of 'face-to-face' sex, meaning that anal intercourse is avoided so as to evade issues of masculine/feminine or active/passive roles.
7. Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray, "Introduction," in Murray and Roscoe, *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, 4-6. Roscoe also gives an interesting account of the sexual culture of pre-Islamic Arabia, and of the emergence of the sexual culture of classic Arab civilization from the interaction between this pre-Islamic culture and sexual cultures of the Persian, Byzantine and Western Roman empires that the Arabs conquered: Roscoe, "Precursors of Islamic Male Homosexualities," in *Islamic Homosexualities*, 55-86. Given the influence of pre-rabbinical Judaism on Islam, the sexual culture of pre-Islamic Arabia might be illuminated by a comparison with the sexual culture of the ancient Hebrews: see Daniel Boyarin, "Are There Any Jews in 'The History of Sexuality'?" *Journal for the History of Sexuality* vol. 5 no. 3 (1995), 333-55.
8. I summarize the evidence in my "Introduction: Remapping Sexualities," in Peter Drucker (ed.), *Different Rainbows*, London: GMP, 2000, 24-25.
9. See my "Introduction" to *Different Rainbows*, 29.
10. Doug Ireland, "Iraqi Gay Activist Arrested, Tortured," Gay City News, May 3, 2007.
11. In an otherwise vigorous defense of *Desiring Arabs*, Yoshie Furuhashi has commented that Massad has "relatively little to say about the role [of] the emergence and development of the capitalist mode of production, with its tendency to proletarianize, urbanize, atomize, and commodify people, in the emergence and development of [a] discourse of sexuality under capitalist modernity." (<http://montages.blogspot.com/2007/10/desiring-arabs.html>)
12. I make this argument at length in the "Introduction" to *Different Rainbows*, 14-25.
13. Gilbert Achcar, "The Arab Despotic Exception," in *Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004, 69-74.
14. On its face, the term "Gay International" suggests an analogy with the Communist International. It seems like a curious choice of epithet for someone like Massad, who seems in some sense to identify with the left.
15. See my "Introduction" to *Different Rainbows*, 31-32, 34.
16. [www.helem.net](http://www.helem.net); "Lebanese gay group helping refugee relief," Pink News, September 1, 2006.
17. Haneen Maikey, "Rainbow over Palestine," [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), March 10, 2008.
18. Massad's assertion may not do justice even to the classical Arab conception of sexual desire. John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian*

## Arab Sexualities

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Era to the Fourteenth Century, 27, notes for example, "In Islamic Sufi literature homosexual eroticism was a major metaphorical expression of the spiritual relationship between God and man."

19. In my conclusion, "Reinventing Liberation," to *Different Rainbows*, 217-20, I suggest that LGBT movements in the dependent world are likely to often be alliances of a range of groups with distinctive sexualities and identities.  
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