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Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut*, University of Texas Press, 2014, 307 pp., \$55.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780292760967.

*Homosexuality suggests a different form of organized society, different ways of conception and procreation which do not at all resemble the so-called natural world of the animal kingdom, which has no doubt inspired religious doctrines on sexual behaviour, where the male rules supreme and the female acts as a recipient.*¹

– Samar Habib

*...no 'gay liberation movement' is possible as long as homosexuality is caught up in a relation of exclusive disjunction with heterosexuality, a relation that ascribes them both to a common Oedipal and castrating stock, charged with ensuring only their differentiation in two noncommunicating series, instead of bringing to light their reciprocal inclusion and their transverse communication in the decoded flows of desire (included disjunctions, local connections, nomadic conjunction).*²

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

In the “Terminal Essay” of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, Richard Burton repeatedly states that “sodomy” is widely present in all Arab and Muslim countries.³ In the long essay, apart from giving proof of his erudition, Burton tries to define, with pseudo-scientific criteria, a Sotadic Zone in the core of the Mediterranean sea. Pederasty’s diffusion gives origin to a “crasis,” in his opinion, due to the fact that in this region male and female temperaments constantly mix, contrary to other areas where it happens only in a sporadic way. Burton deems the “Vice” (always with a capital “V” when written in the text) “prevalent and endemic” in the above mentioned region, and he notes that in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* the subject is treated along three different lines of narrative: a first

¹ Samar Habib, *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, and H.R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 350.

³ Richard Burton, “Terminal Essay,” in *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Nights*, Vol. 10 (London: The Burton Club, 1886), Section D. Pederasty, 178-219.

one, ludic; a second one that he considers “more dangerous than perversion”; and, finally, a third one which in his opinion has to be seriously condemned.⁴

This threefold idea of homosexuality in the Middle East remained for a long time the prevalent one. It was only in the twentieth century that the Orientalist worldview was critically discussed and that studies about same-sex relationships, which proposed a different approach, began to appear. In 1990, Bruce W. Dunne published “Homosexuality in the Middle East: An Agenda for Historical Research”⁵ in which he invoked Joan Scott’s argument that gender is a useful category of historical analysis.⁶ Building upon this point, he explains the reasons why homosexuality is a “closed subject of inquiry.”⁷ Among these reasons, he contends, are the lack of public debates about sexuality within Arab countries, the fact that homosexuality remains a taboo in official discourse, and the fact that male homosexuality is a neglected subject in historical as well as interdisciplinary scholarship about the Middle East. Dunne, moreover, states that “what may be described as a structural myopia of predominant heterosexual scholarship is entirely congruent with the orientalist epistemological legacy of treating texts (e.g. Quranic prohibitions) as constitutive of social realities.”⁸

Since Dunne’s article was published, scholarship about homosexuality in the classical, as well as modern and contemporary Arab world has increased. However, the vast majority of these published works, as Sabine Schmidtke has argued, rely on a binary perspective resulting from their strictly philological approach. This approach, strongly criticized among others by Peter Gram, “places great weight on the idea of authoritative texts and authoritative translations. Such texts stabilize and canonize meaning, providing a normative basis of continuity. This stability is the primary goal of a philologist, how people actually speak or read or understand [or behave or interact, I would add] is less important.”⁹

Queer Beirut deals with the cultural construction of bodies that connects space, time, and gender. What happens when bodies that are not expected to occupy certain places invade them? What are the consequences when the spaces organized and secured by the prevailing forces within a society are challenged or ultimately dismantled by different agencies? Contrary to the overly textual, and therefore reductive, method of philologists, in *Queer Beirut* Sofian Merabet anthropologically describes homosexuals as space invaders.¹⁰ As a case in point, Beirut organizes its spaces to set into relation otherwise unrelated bodies within a binary heteronormative structure. Space invaders question this spacial setting. Whereas the city and its constitutive neighborhoods are designed to define personal and social relations by limiting how individuals and groups occupy and utilize it along social and political lines, queer bodies introduce fissures in the urban plan. If, for instance, gay citizens of Beirut struggle to become accepted by a bourgeois milieu, this happens not only through occupying space, but also by introducing a different way of speaking, a different culture, and a different lifestyle; therefore, they reshape, in the meantime, how information and culture circulate and

⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁵ Bruce W. Dunne, “Homosexuality in the Middle East: An Agenda for Historical Research,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 12, Nos. 3 & 4 (1990), 55-82.

⁶ Joan Scott, “Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 19, No. 5 (Dec. 1986), 1053-1075.

⁷ Sabine Schmidtke, “Homoeroticism and Homosexuality in Islam: a Review Article,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies of London*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (1999), 261.

⁸ Dunne, “Homosexuality in the Middle East,” 56.

⁹ Peter Gram, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), xxi.

¹⁰ Nirmal Purvar, *Space Invaders: Space, Gender, and Bodies Out of Place* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

thus trouble social conformity—another way of producing queer spaces. Furthermore, they linger in particular areas usually dominated by heterosexual culture, as well as restore neglected urban neighborhoods to life. In so doing, homosexuals became visible as a group, modifying the urban architecture, culture, and ambiance; they, therefore, *queer* Beirut. Thus their relationship with space has at least two consequences. Firstly, the urban landscape is altered. Even if some aggregation centers or zones change, a queer memory will remain: not only in the minds of the citizens, but also in the architecture and city structure at large. Secondly, the social configuration of the city changes forever, as queer affects people, relationships, minds. As Michel de Certeau reminds us, the *flâneur* navigating the urban space brings life to the city.¹¹ The city is, therefore, a palimpsest, and people are the stories that are interwoven in the urban fabric. This all goes to prove that space is not a fixed entity; it moves and changes depending on how it is used, particularly when dealing with bodies and cities.¹² Merabet suggests reading the “in-between-ness” of this dynamism in order to find new meanings (64). The reader can see this method at work in the author’s field notes throughout the text, where the writing registers change. Here, the reader experiences a different kind of reading as Merabet interweaves a poetical vein in his writing as a counterpoint to the critical approach of his research.

To *queer Beirut* also means a change in the way we conduct research, and this book will undoubtedly affect queer studies too. Merabet not only knows well what empathy means, he knows what it means to be an engaged researcher, and the book can be also read as the queering of research. Whereas in the aforementioned scholarship queer people are an object of study, are denied a voice of their own, and are invisible as persons, in *Queer Beirut* they become active participants and contribute to the shaping of the scholarly space. In this manner, Merabet succeeds in maintaining the right equilibrium in his research; he avoids the trap of allowing either his academic credentials or his activist sympathies to overshadow the protagonists of his story, who are equally the authors of this work.

It is illegitimate to define sexualities in terms of exclusion and/or opposition, and therefore we must accept a more sophisticated view of sexualities. However, while progress has been made, yet another division has been created to defer, deflect, and once again ostracize those who have invaded the spaces constructed by the white Western heterosexual discourse: we have entered the so-called posthuman era. When we were only “human,” the story goes, there were non-humans, i.e., “others,” genders, and categories of beings that were not human “laureate,” so to speak.¹³ Now that the once excluded—women, racial minorities, and homosexuals, for example—after a long struggle, have won admittance into the previously narrowly defined “human” category, the white Western heterosexual discourse has switched to the posthuman, thus overcoming concepts of humanism versus anti-humanism. Therefore, these groups are once again set back, because although they are now “human” they are not yet “posthuman.” White Western heterosexual identity still defines itself in a dichotomic way, relying on oppositions. As with the nineteenth century Hegelian paradigm of “the Rise of the West,” the definition of this identity is always in search of an abject in order to define itself. Nevertheless, as Sofian Merabet enlightens us, nothing can ultimately stop the marginalized from invading spaces, reconfiguring the urban landscape,

¹¹ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹² Elizabeth Grosz, “Lived Spatially (The Spaces of Corporeal Desire),” in *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 31-47.

¹³ I owe this expression to Alessandra Consolaro, University of Turin, Italy.

and telling their stories. In doing so, they will continue to question the violent representations produced by violent historiographies and offer to the reader new perspectives on desire. As the author states, “*Queer Beirut* is intended as a small contribution toward showing how certain individuals deal with their respective everyday ‘inferno’ and how they ‘give space’ to expressions that do not always conform with what is socially expected from them” (248).

Bayrūt lā tamūt (Beirut never dies) says a well known slogan. Nor will queer Beirut.

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