

Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962-1979*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 317 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226493275; \$36.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226790381.

Response by Todd Shepard, Johns Hopkins University.

A fellow scholar who really reads one's book and, with clarity and concision, maps out what work it aims to do and highlights other questions this mapping raises; I cannot thank Arthur Asseraf enough for that, or Lynne Taylor and *H-France Review* for the chance to engage with his reading. Questions of temporality, historicization, and of what categories and methods we use to analyze the past merit some attention.

“Rather than the traditional and rather stale dates of political history, here French life moves to the rhythm of events in North Africa in the Middle East”: Asseraf has captured how reperiodization undergirds this book's arguments. 1962 saw Algerian nationalists' defeat of France. In 1979, French reactions to the Iranian Revolution both capped the frittering away of one of the key understandings that structured novel post-1962 discussions of “the Arab man” and catalyzed the return of more recognizable Orientalist visions.[1] Analyses of “sexual Orientalism” show that sex, sexuality, and gender were crucial registers in the Western elaboration of an “Orient” that was radically different from the West--and so required colonization. In 1962, with Algerian independence, France no longer ruled any Arab country. Why then, as my research shows, did claims about so-called Arab sexual and gender difference still percolate through so many French public debates?[2] The book homes in on what was quite atypical about the version of sexual Orientalism that emerged in 1962, now unmoored from the justification of formal empire, and which had largely faded by 1979: claims about males predominated, when usually women and girls peopled such fantasies (and nightmares). “Ephebes,” “the Arab boy,” or other references to effeminacy or languid passivity were also notably sparse in this version, when, more typically, Orientalist language about males was rife with such depictions.

In French sex talk about Arabs between 1962 and 1979, I argue, claims anchored in (ultra) virility, manliness, and (hyper) masculinity dominated. This was novel. What was structurally similar to other discourses that posit radical difference, however, was the tension between two groupings of claims, -phobic and -philic. On the one hand, there was the “Arab male invader,” typified by aggressive sexual deviance and an (animal) maleness, whose penetration of European France threatened to violate homes, bodies, and all that supposedly made the French nation a healthy whole. On the other, it was “the heroic Arab man,” heir of the Algerian Revolution's victory over (French) imperialism, capitalism, and dehumanization, who supposedly embodied a revolutionary form of masculinity. Many leftists claimed that this figure could inspire French and universal efforts to end ongoing forms of oppression and exploitation, including in the realms of sexuality and gender. Both visions (that of fear, as well as of fascination), depended on exoticizing stereotypes even as both worked to account for the unexpected situation that emerged

from the end of France's Maghrebi (and Mediterranean) empire and, most especially, the victory of Algerian forces over wealthy and powerful France.

After 1979, some things remained the same, while others became nearly unthinkable. The phobic version--"the Arab invasion of France" and the trouble this supposedly brings--remains quite legible. Its specificities have fully integrated ongoing Orientalist and racist certainties where Islam again is center stage. The contours of the other, philic stereotype that I identify, however--"the heroic Arab man"--are now imperceptible, almost unimaginable. Just as philosemitism always shadows and gives depth to antisemitism, so diverse Orientalist conceptions depend on types of Arabo- or Islamophilia. Like them, this positive stereotype limited the individual possibilities of those it claimed to celebrate. Yet the particular stereotype I identify acknowledged imperialist and racist violence, the history of resistance and of recent anti-imperialist victories, as well as the ongoing weight of these colonial histories in contemporary France. "The Revolutionary Arab Man" was profoundly political, not timeless, a blinkered vision that still brought harsh interpretations of the French and Western past and present into view. The book maps how it receded from view.

Starting in 1962 and ending in 1979, that is, allows me to offer a history of change over time, with a clear cause--the French grappling with the Algerians' victory over the French state, which upended the racist and Orientalist belief that this was impossible--and the enduring effects of this realization (as well as this victory) on the Fifth Republic's politics and culture. The goal was, as Asseraf notes, to locate "the events of May 1968... squarely in the middle of other revolutions in the Third World." I share his "hope that further research will probe deeper into 1979 and the role of the Iranian Revolution in a broader realignment of the French political economy in the 1970s that we are only beginning to properly assess historically." My cultural history of the dense intersection between talk of sex and claims about Arabs anchors a reperiodization of late twentieth-century France that does more than that.

This chronology historicizes (sexual) Orientalism, a useful analytic category that, too often, is ahistorical, unspecified, as if it always works in more or less the same ways. What I identify is a French discourse about Arab men anchored in the history of French Algeria and the Algerian War that was deeply entwined with the French emergence of the transnational sexual revolution. Historical specificity anchors how I draw on relevant histories and comparable analyses. Historians of racism do much more historicization and this book builds on that analytic tradition. This, however, is not a history of race or racism writ large and cannot be easily compared to other such histories.

This discourse, I argue, mattered a lot at the time, but it was not recognized as such. The terms that I use--especially, Arab--were those of "actors." "Arab men and sex," however, is the analytic frame I impose to make sense of the evidence and developments my research uncovered and that I worked to bring into conversation. Many commentators at the time targeted groups and discussions in France they saw as obsessed with "Arab men" in sexual terms. Yet claims that far-right activists, "homosexual revolutionaries," or feminists had a libidinal fixation on Arab men never coalesced. I had to demonstrate "the existence of a particular cluster of concerns between sex, France, and Arab men." My argument is that the pull of this constellation dramatically shaped contemporary French discussions about both those called Arabs and everything linked to

public debates about sex. Both were very vibrant conversations, arguably more so between 1962 and 1979 than they had been before, and they thus had real effects on other developments and understandings, too, sexual among them.

Research in “sex talk” made visible the discourse around the Arab man and sex. Sex talk is a category of evidence that historians have almost completely ignored. I define it as “diverse references to sex, sexual morality, deviance, and normalcy in publications, archived documents, and visual sources” (p. 3). My attention to the varied genres and the enormous quantities of such materials helps explain the potency of the evidence and may confuse some, both points that Asseraf makes. I risked the latter because what I wanted to be clearly visible is that research in sex talk allowed me to explicate how the Arab man and sex had shaped French politics and culture, in ways that still resonate today, yet had escaped attention.

Research in sex talk, that is, can allow historians to do much more than write about sexual identities or sexuality. Theoretically-informed cultural histories are particularly pertinent, to take full advantage of the unexpected revelations and detours that extensive research in primary source materials of all kinds make possible. This entails doing what Asseraf calls “distinctive and fresh reading of texts,” some, as noted, well known, but most not. Histories of the very recent past that engage strangeness, understandings that now seem quite alien to us, are difficult to do. This time and hard work are worth it when what the historian shows can illuminate present-day developments in unexpected, even counterintuitive ways. This is the promise of “histories of the present,” and it is why I foreground the troubled French history of the heroic Algerian man and the Arab revolution, for example.

The chapter on the sodomy vogue of the 1970s, does similar work, and I am pleased that Asseraf closes his review with a discussion of this effort to put into practice my insistence that “particular sex acts have a history.” “Power, Resistance, and Sodomy in Post-Algerian France” details how anal sex became crucial to various efforts to rethink how to conceptualize power (Bertolucci’s *The Last Tango in Paris* and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* are some examples). Asseraf calls this “kinky history,” which, rather oddly, sets up a dismissal of cultural history as “vanilla history.”

The cultural history I embrace looks beyond unproductive binaries, such as “acts” and “talk.” This makes it possible to critique truth-claims anchored in identities rather than rely on their supposed solidity; it also shows how the contested status and meaning of a particular sex act actually changed, and came to mean something different. This, evidence suggests, led to more anal sex even as talk of this act inspired new ways to understand big questions, such as power. Both developments matter, and to show that change in meaning changes the act--to not presume that “we know it when we see it,” or hear about it, or even do it--does require evidence and, just as important, tools to interpret that evidence. It is about the method. The type of theoretically-informed history I embrace, in fact, can do this. I’m eager to see what other approaches might do, but it is worth noting that few historians working in the contemporary era even try to historicize sex acts. And what specific eras and people define as a sex act, of course, also determines what types of lived experiences even get named or recalled as fucking, fondly or otherwise.[3] Yet I wonder: what historical evidence gets outside of “talk,” in ways that allow one “to write a history that recaptured the bodies, the lived experiences, the activism, migration,

and border-crossing, that took place in those years”? With evidence, as with sex, I prefer the actual to the imaginary. The evidence we have--sex talk, too--is never transparent; it always requires interpretation.

The results of vanilla history that I critique are Janus-faced: on one side, histories of France and the West that “erase the importance of people of color.” On the flip side, vanilla histories of sex, which “pretend that its multiple valences and diverse forms are best ignored” (p. 16). This book reveals how false both versions of the past are, as well as their potent intersections, even as it seeks to explain why they still hold sway. Theoretically-honed lenses, a vision of culture that focuses on how meaning is produced, and a source base with coherent boundaries and lots of evidence (sex talk): this is what I think make it possible to identify and begin to overcome these blindspots and open new sightlines into what mattered in post-decolonization France.

NOTES

[1] I grapple with similar dynamics during the Algerian War (1954-1962) itself in “Introduction. ‘Guerre des sexes, politiques du genre’” (co-written with Catherine Brun) in Catherine Brun and Todd Shepard, eds., *Guerre d’Algérie. Le sexe outragé* (Paris: CNRS éd., 2016), 11-26 and chapter six, “Veiled ‘Muslim’ Women, Violent Pied Noir Men, and the Family of France: Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnic Difference,” in *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 183-203.

[2] In this response, as throughout the book, the term "Arab(s)" usually appears unmarked, except when it is placed in parallel with other problematic categories or its use demands particular attention. Much work demonstrates that it is always a problematic term: my book details various reasons why it mattered to actors at the time.

[3] See also: Todd Shepard, “Against Vanilla History: Why and How Histories of Sexual Acts Could Matter to Intellectual Historians,” in *The Society of Ideas: A Handbook of Intellectual History and Sociology of Ideas*, edited by Gisèle Sapiro and Stefanos Geroulanos (in preparation for Routledge).

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