


Although some Sufis continue to lament the destruction, others seem to have embarked on a journey of willful amnesia. The way this amnesia manifests itself is worth noting. “No, you must be mistaken. There was no tomb there,” one said when being interviewed (p. 149). Another stated, point-blank, that “there was never any building in Takhteh-Foulad” (p. 149). By Golestaneh’s own admission these are awkward moments in fieldwork. They are moments of arrest in the sense of hindering further inquiries, but also, by not offering a verbal explication, the interlocutors leave space for contending conjectures, all equally plausible: Did the anthropologist use the wrong word to refer to the demolished building and cause confusion by doing so? Are the Sufis in question so traumatized by the experience their minds have blocked out the memories altogether? Or have they been so terrorized they feel uncomfortable sharing their thoughts with an outsider anthropologist? Or, perhaps, as Golestaneh argues in the book, they are involved in an act of resistance in which, by deliberately forgetting and thereby overcoming the trauma, they are able to rebuild a continuity on the spiritual level in which the razing of a material shrine in no way interrupts their mystical pursuit. All of these are conceivable scenarios, and all of them may have been present simultaneously among the Sufis involved.

In the last chapter, Golestaneh turns her attention to the use of sound among young Sufis. With characteristic subtlety and the tenderness of a poet she describes how the hosts of a Sufi gathering gently tap on a *daf* (frame drum) to produce music just loud enough to guide interested participants to their destination without soliciting excessive attention from other passersby, or unwanted interference from the government. The gentle rhythm acts like the wafting scent of incense to draw the seekers of mystical truth to the warm embrace of poetry and *zīkr*. Golestaneh’s writing throughout the book is lucid and effective, frequently poetic. The book is heavily descriptive and does a wonderful job dissecting the nuances of the many interviews it cites. *Unknowing and the Everyday* is a solid piece of scholarship; it also can be considered a beautifully crafted memoir of a wandering Sufi of an academic, lost in the charmingly mystical landscape of contemporary Isfahan.

doi:10.1017/S0020743823001241

Between Banat: Queer Arab Critique and Transnational Arab Archives

Mejdule Bernard Shomali (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023). 224 pp. \$25.95 paper. ISBN: 9781478019275

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Between Banat is a search for queer ancestors and queer futures. Both searches—for queer Arab ancestors and queer Arab futures—are driven by a pivotal question: “What would it mean to be queer, Arab, and OK?” (p. 138). Mejdule Bernard Shomali seeks answers in community histories and archives, exploring how queer Arab women, *banāt*, and femmes are represented (or erased) and how they represent themselves. Moving between languages, genres, and temporalities, the book examines diverse texts ranging from popular golden-era Egyptian cinema to contemporary Arab American novels, from activist-published autobiographical writing to graphic novels, films, apparel, and print produced in multiple Arab geographies and diasporas. By juxtaposing these diverse texts and analyzing them through the lens of “queer Arab critique,” Shomali assembles a transnational Arab archive that



centers on women's desires and narratives and showcases works that resist erasure, insist on presence, and enable queer joy and pleasure.

Queer Arab critique is a much-needed framework, which at once ruptures the normative discourses that shape and confine Arab women's sexualities, diligently excavates the traces of queer *banāt* in Arab cultural production, and offers a road map for building a free, joyful, and pleasurable queer Arab future. Shomali positions *banāt*—a transliterated term that refers to women, femmes, and nonbinary people—at the core of this study for a few critical reasons. First, *banāt* challenge the idealized Arab femininity that is “patriotic, reproductive, elitist, and anti-Black” (p. 30). Through her in-depth examination of the figure of Scheherazade in the renowned tale of *The Thousand and One Nights* and in contemporary Arab American literature (Chapter 1), Shomali reveals how such depictions not only confine women's sexualities within the bounds of heteronormativity, heteronationalism, and anti-Blackness but also foreclose the representation of Arab queer subjectivities in mainstream Arab culture. Second, *banāt* allow Arab women to depict their intricate, multifaceted lives on their own terms. These narratives are not reducible to Western identity categories like “lesbian,” nor are they expressed through Western paradigms such as “coming out” or “cruising.” Third, instead of the frequently portrayed narratives of homoeroticism centered on gay men, *banāt* enable readers to think queerness through women and femininity first. Finally, centering *banāt* at the heart of queer Arab critique acknowledges the creative labor of women and femmes in both cultural production and political organizing.

It is noteworthy that both queer Arab critique and the queer archives fashioned in the book are marked by their ambivalence that resists easy categorization, certainty, and closure. While Shomali seeks traces of queer Arab subjects in literature and art, she simultaneously rejects to contain queerness and Arabness in conclusive and exclusive definitions. For instance, by examining three Arabic language novels (Chapter 3) and three activist-published autobiographical collections (Chapter 4), Shomali carefully walks readers through various—and at times, contradictory and ambivalent—articulations and self-representations of queerness. This analysis asserts that queer Arab subjects resist their erasure, insist on their presence, and create intimate, complicated lives while offering powerful critiques of heteropatriarchy, heteronationalism, and colonial and settler violence in different Arab geographies and diasporas. Through this analysis, Shomali demonstrates how queerness and Arabness are not fixed categories but relational and transnational, evolving through “desires between bodies, bodies between nations, words between languages, nations between one another” (p. 2).

This ambivalence, which necessitates a keen attentiveness to “the between,” also underpins the book's methodology. Shomali develops queer Arab critique “as a methodology and toolkit for locating queer women's desires” (p. 23) in spaces where the possibility of homoerotic desire and intimacy are erased or overlooked. Queer Arab critique wants us to read critically and between the lines. To look under the bed or observe what lurks in the shadows. To read against the heteronormative grain. Sometimes, it requires adopting a queer viewpoint, whether as a spectator or a reader, and forging an affective identification with characters in films or novels. At other times, it calls for invoking moments of curiosity and imagining “what if” scenarios. Together, these techniques direct us to the affective, ephemeral, and gestural sites and expressions of queerness. This might manifest in a cinematic scene of two women belly dancing, in the skillful linguistic play of queer Arab writers manipulating Arabic and English to carve out queer spaces in their texts, or in a simple yet profound act like a friend presenting Shomali with two copies of a queer activist publication in Palestine. In these moments, queerness—its presence and possibility—shines through in subtle, fleeting, yet potent ways.

The question of temporality also plays a crucial role in queer Arab critique. Shomali's meticulous archival exploration does not merely aim to uncover historical expressions of queer desire among women. Instead, she intertwines the past, present, and future, emphasizing the continuous presence of queer women, *banāt*, femmes, and nonbinary people

throughout Arab cultural history. As she articulates, “the dialogue is already ongoing, has been, and will continue” (p. 2). This insistence on queerness as a continuous and persisting dialogue makes two significant interventions: First, it refutes the Western Orientalist and Arab heteronationalist perspectives that wrongly suggest that queerness is new and/or alien to Arab cultures and comes from Western colonization. Second, it encourages readers to perceive the queer archives curated in the book not merely as historical evidence of past desires but as affirmations of queerness’s present existence and hope for potential queer futures.


Queer Arab critique’s emphasis on futurity is most palpable in Chapter 5, my favorite chapter of the book, which revisits the project’s central question: What would it mean to be queer, Arab, and OK? Shomali seeks answers to this by examining the works of multidisciplinary artists spanning illustration, fashion, design, literature, and cinema. What is fascinating about this chapter is witnessing how queer artists combine art and activism, take central roles in liberation movements, and insist on transnational organizing to create new paths toward freedom, healing, and justice for women. Drawing inspiration from the artists’ creative labor, Shomali posits that radical queer futures necessitate a rejection of authenticity, respectability, and inclusion politics, striving instead toward a world that centers joy, pleasure, and collective organizing.

Between Banat contributes to an array of fields, including gender and sexuality studies, SWANA studies, literary studies, film and media studies, and cultural studies. It is an essential read for everyone who wants to understand the complexities of queer Arab lives, especially given the myriad restrictive discourses and violent realities that make it difficult to narrate and embody this complexity. More importantly, it offers a much-needed road map for all those striving to envision and build radical queer futures. *Between Banat* powerfully asserts that being OK doesn’t merely mean to exist but to have hope, joy, and pleasure. It asks us to dare to imagine and build a world in which racialized queer subjects do not simply survive but thrive.

doi:10.1017/S0020743823001332

Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon, 1920–1950

Kirsten L. Scheid (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2023). Pp. 374. \$85.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper. ISBN: 9780253064233

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From afar, the cover of *Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon, 1920–1950* appears to showcase one of Saloua Raouda Choucair’s well-known modular abstract sculptures, with uneven blocks stacked together like the stanzas of a poem. On closer inspection, however, one discovers the form is instead constructed out of thin scraps of sliced-up archival paper with Arabic words scattered about, including *al-fann*, *al-fanūn*, *al-fannān*, *al-fannānīn*, and *al-fannānāt* (art, arts, artist, artists, female artists). This cover art was made specifically for the book by New York-based, Beirut-born contemporary artist Walid Raad (b. 1967). The piece pays homage to Choucair’s legacy but also points to the prevalent discourse of lack both inside and outside Lebanon. Indeed, for many decades, despite active artists, art exhibitions, and art discourse, many in the Euro-American academy, and in Beirut, claimed there was “no art” in 20th-century Lebanon, a narrative that the book challenges directly.