Queer Arab Critique & Transnational Arab Archives

Mejdulene Bernard Shomali

between banat

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MEJDULENE BERNARD SHOMALI

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for banat arab
and for the arab women who have loved me into possibility

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Reader, are you still here? As it became more obvious *Between Banat* would indeed exist as an object in the world, I found myself embarrassed to imagine people would read it, and equally embarrassed they would not. Reader, thank you.

introduction

I began this work in search of ancestors. I wanted to find other queer Arab women. I wanted to hear their stories as evidence of my own history, as hope for my future. But I looked for ancestors without knowing their names. Many queer women eschewed the names available to them in Arabic or English: lesbian, gay, سحاقيّة (sahaqiya), شاذة (shaatha). Others did not publicly or politically articulate their sexualities for fear of violent reprisals. Some chose to live queerly, but their queerness was "unremarkable." By this I mean they were remarkably strange: spinster aunts and حسن صبي (hasan subi) cousins whose sexuality was left pointedly without remark. I could not figure out how to call to other queer Arab women, and so I was at a loss to find them. Instead, over time I discovered my kin calling to me. A knowing glance in a conference hotel lobby. A playful wink on-screen. A double entendre intended just for my ears. Someone familiar, someone kin called to me from many spaces and texts. Even when I could not speak them, I felt their resonance. This book is the story of queer Arab women's becoming as I found it, but it also the story of unbecoming: the unbecoming ways we are erased in Orientalist and Arab heteropatriarchal thought and the unbecoming of identities and practices that do not serve us. *Between Banat: Queer Arab Critique and Transnational Arab Archives* is my love letter to my unnamed ancestors. It is the knowing glance, playful wink, and double entendre between us. It is the ways we

call one another, not only for recognition and community, but to action and movement toward a joyful and pleasurable queer Arab future.

Queer Arabs, and especially queer Arab women, face a discursive double bind that often invisibilizes or undermines their presence: Orientalism fashions Arab cultures as abject via queerness, and Arab cultures often reject queerness as symptomatic of Western assimilation. This double bind produces "queer Arab" as a site of anxiety. How do we call someone queer when the act of recognition can produce misrecognition, stigmatizing the subject as inauthentic or assimilated? How does one search for "queer Arab women" when the language and categories available for search are ahistorical and at risk for positing epistemic violence on their subjects? Queer sexuality, particularly women's queer sexualities, are understudied within Arab and Arab American scholarship and do not function in parallel to Western iterations of LGBTQ history and identity. They require an alternative methodology and archive, a different kind of story/telling. That is, a different kind of story and a different kind of telling.

In order to study queer Arab women, *Between Banat* develops queer Arab critique grounded not in individual subjects, but in attentiveness to the between: desires between bodies, bodies between nations, words between languages, nations between one another. Through queer Arab critique the book fashions queer Arab archives, which are ever moving, ever circulating. Indeed, it is only through movement and relation that queer Arab archives can be constituted at all. The archive is a living record that constantly changes because it's constituted between bodies, in movement, in the transnational.

Queer Arab critique is affirmative insofar as it insists on the historical, contemporary, and future presence and relevance of queer women in and of Arab cultures. It is tentative insofar as I do not offer conclusive and exclusive definitions of what constitutes Arab or queer cultures. I maintain elasticity as a foundational premise to understanding queer Arab women's subjectivity, desires, and lives. The certainty in this work then is derived not from a prescription toward how we must discuss or think queerness in Arab cultures, but rather a certainty that dialogue is already ongoing, has been, and will continue. I offer points of conversation and invitation within the dialogue of queer Arab studies: What has precluded queer Arab subjects from being visible in mainstream Arab cultures? What possibilities for queer life happen outside of conventional earshot? How do queer women and femmes narrate their lives? How do we move beyond survival, visibility, and inclusion to imagine a joyful and free queer future?

In this work queerness and Arabness are interstitial subjects, formed in and out of tension. The book demonstrates how heteropatriarchies, Arab nationalisms, and Orientalisms work in relation to mire queer Arab women's horizons. It catalogues the challenges toward seeing and imagining queer Arab life in the past and present. At the same time, queer Arab women and femmes teach us how to surpass our foreclosure by rejecting authenticity, respectability, and inclusion as adequate tools or strategies for queer futures. *Between Banat* uses literature, art, and films about queer Arab women, created by Arab women, femmes, and nonbinary people, to articulate queer Arab critique and fashion queer Arab archives. Through critique I substantiate the archive, which includes the limiting discourses that arrest and occlude queer Arab women's lives, techniques for locating queer Arab women's stories amid heteronormative imperatives, vignettes and analyses of queer life as imagined by Arab subjects, and axioms for inspiring a queer Arab future with women, femmes, and nonbinary people at its center. Queer Arab critique is both an analytic frame that allows us to see queer Arab histories and presence, and the underlying premise of this work: attention to women's desires, bodies, and experiences gives us critical tools to live and forge queer futures.

Between Banat is as much an archive of queer texts as it is an archive driven by longing and desire for queer representations. In addition to its concentration on women and femininity, the archive assembled in this book is bound and cohered by affective attachments: the longing and desire for queer Arab women's historical and future company; the anxiety and ambivalence associated with trying to isolate or categorize a queer Arab woman as such; and the evasive tactics and maneuvers used by writers, characters, and myself to maintain some levels of opacity and privacy about the intimacies of queer Arab women's lives. In *Between Banat*, feelings abound and shape both the objects that are archived and the arguments that I offer.

Namely, I consider feeling aesthetically and analytically useful in the deployment of queer Arab critique and the assemblage of queer Arab archives. Sianne Ngai asserts that "feeling can be used to expand the project of criticism and theory."[1] The feelings the texts produce and the feelings the texts circulate are diagnostics for what animates and ails queer subjects. Because of its association with femininity, feeling is disparaged in both public cultural spaces (e.g., political spheres) as well as in cultural texts (e.g., "women's literatures"). For example, the Arabic novels discussed in chapter 3 are devalued in Arab criticism because they explore the emotional lives of women, usually in stream-of-consciousness narration. Drawing from Lauren Berlant's work on sentimentality, Sara Ahmed's work on complaint,

and Ngai's work on "ugly feelings," I reject the disparagement of "feminine" and negative feelings. Instead, I use feeling as a means by which to understand femininity and the demands placed on feminine subjects in heteropatriarchal contexts.

I build on feminist and transnational feminist theorizing to explore how Arab queerness is associated with certain affects and how affective positions inform how we imagine and articulate our queerness. Transnational feminist thinkers have explored how feeling becomes racialized, how Brown and Black peoples are erased and harmed through the affects and emotions written on their bodies. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed considers the plight of the melancholy migrant, a subject whose diasporic longing, rather than imperial and racist violence, allegedly undermines their capacity for happiness in the new nation.[2] In *Arab and Muslims in the Media*, Evelyn Alsultany articulates how pity is mobilized in Orientalist and anti-Arab representations to undermine the agency of Muslim women.[3] Dina Georgis writes of shame as an affective marker of queer Arab identity that might be usefully recuperated by queer subjects.[4] In *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, Georgis considers primarily queer pain and racial suffering. Queer Arab subjects sit at the affective crossroads of such texts: discourses about them—Orientalist, imperial, and Arab nationalist—conscript their capacities for existence, let alone joy. Homonormative notions about queer life formulated in Western LGBT spaces regard some of the primary emotional registers of queer Arab life—shame and ambivalence—as markers of failed or bad queer subjects. Instead, following the model set forward in Jennifer Nash's *Black Feminism Reimagined*, I consider how queer women's lives, cultural production, and activisms are informed by their affective postures.[5] Queer Arab critique is an affective posture marked by ambivalence. Though ambivalence might open queer Arab archives to criticism regarding their "authenticity" as queer or Arab subjects, I demonstrate how ambivalence is productive rather than constrictive. *Between Banat* uses emotion as a way into queerness, where "good and bad feminine" feelings alert us to moments of queer emergence, queer presence, and queer joy. Feeling, like gesture and ephemera, is fleeting and mobile and thus imminently suitable to the ambivalence of queer Arab critique and the queer archives mobilized here.

Beyond an attention to how texts and subjects "feel," feeling operates as imperative—that which motivates and shapes action in both literary and material instances; feeling is that which curates the archive itself. In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich notes that an archive can be constituted through the affective investment of the archivist who creates it.[6] My "feel" for queerness

in Arab cultures draws objects into this archive. Yet, this book is a reluctant archive, and I am a reluctant archivist. Here, the work of making queer Arab archives is coupled with a simultaneous commitment to their unmaking. Thinking alongside Anjali Arondekar, I understand *Between Banat* both as a recuperative gesture, a reading against history to make history, and at the same time, a worried contribution to the archive it imagines.[7] I borrow gestural from Juana María Rodríguez's *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings.* Rodríguez identifies the gestural as a socially legible and kinetic form of communication, one that sometimes captures what cannot be said and what we do not want others to hear.[8] In this way, gesture captures queerness as a relation between rather than a sedimented end. In "Ephemera as Evidence," José Esteban Muñoz refers to the queerness of ephemera—that the fleeting nature of an object with shaky ontology is queer. He too proposes "queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality."[9] This form of queerness is essential for queer Arab critique and its archives, particularly because of the discursive limitations queer Arabs face and because of the ambivalence around identity queer Arabs often express. *Between Banat* studies and operates as an ephemeral and gestural archive, producing legibility in its specific moment of enactment, but with the clear realization that legibility is neither the end goal nor a stable, infinite state.

Between Banat is necessarily an affective archive, one most often marked by ambivalence. While my investments in queer ancestry hail and manifest texts, I maintain some fuzziness about the subjects of those texts. As a vulnerable population, queer Arab women sometimes proceed with caution around legibility or transparency. As Rodríguez notes, communities of color often worry about what we make available for consumption, and to whom.[10] The selection of texts, the analyses provided, and the obfuscations maintained are themselves part of the archive, but they also construct it. That structure is "necessarily inchoate."[11] On the one hand, the archive can be an amulet against queer women's erasure in Arab histories, a testament to the ways we have always existed. It is a celebration of presence, in both the record and the present. In "Venus in Two Acts" Saidiya Hartman discusses how critical readings of the archive mine history to "both tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling."[12] Hartman suggests we can never recover a lost or impossible subject, but we might paint as full a picture as possible. *Between Banat* harbors no doubt that queer Arab women survive and live and love. On the other hand, the book acknowledges that we have not always existed in the same ways, or in ways legible to those who survey our histories and lives. The archive does not repair historical injury or invisibility,

nor produce clear identities from its pages. The evidence of our experience is situational, historical, mediated by me and many other interlocutors.[13] We are here and not. We are queer and not. We name ourselves and we don't. The project of constructing an archive assumes a rigidity that I do not ascribe to the subjects within it. I have tentatively gathered texts that circle around the signifier of queer Arab women, but I am ambivalent about how we understand and use those modifiers.

If *Between Banat's* archive is ambivalent, queer Arab critique is a skeptical method, a side-eye toward itself. There is absurd capacity in Arab, but Arab also occludes many subjects under its broadness, its troubling ethnic primacy in the Arab nations. I focus on women and femininity, though like some writers featured here, I note that woman is not always the sign under which the subjects travel.[14] I discuss nonnormative iterations of gender and sexuality in Arab women and call this queer even while remaining slightly skeptical that such a word can encompass or adequately render the beauty, intimacy, and desires represented. I use queer knowing that it can never really render a clear subject in part because I am committed on some level to our privacy, our secrecy. If the book has a closet, if the closet is an archive: it is disorganized, overfull, cluttered. Things are forever accidentally falling over or out, and the reader only has access to a microscopic slice of what is inside. Sometimes I shove everything back in and close the door.

Between Banat constructs queer Arab critique as a tool to make and unmake queer Arab archives. Making the archive takes the shape of affectively gathering and consolidating texts under the umbrella of "queer Arab women"; unmaking it takes the shape of poking holes in the fabric of Arab, women, and queer. Underneath the umbrella, the book is wet. Its subjects, its canons, its definitions are slippery and elusive. I want the book to feel like a good soak, but I do not imagine it is always useful, necessary, or possible to quantify the rain. *Between Banat* operates in tension with the difficult binaries that animate discussions of Arabness, queerness, and femininity. Each of these terms comes from robust genealogies and are ongoing sites of critical interrogation. I offer the following comments on my use of each.

Arab Is a Transnational Relation

Between Banat suggests that Arabness is a relational quality or subject position rather than a fixed, essential definition open to authentication. Despite some legitimate differences shaped by geography and national origin, Arab

is a meaningful ethnic attachment for many subjects, one that shapes and is shaped by Arabs' relationships to geography, national affiliation, cultural practices, and the Arabic language. Historically, Arab refers neither to a singular country nor to a geographic region. Instead, Arab is often used to designate countries or populations that speak Arabic, are national members of the Arab League, or share cultural and political histories.[15] Each classification can intersect with the next—Arabic is the language of the Quran and as such is used in Muslim communities that may or may not identify with Arab identity; regional differences in the spoken version of the Arabic language might render one Arabic speaker unintelligible to the next. The Arab League includes twenty-two separate nations: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Each has its own complex, individual history; how can the moniker "Arab" account for their heterogeneity? Additionally, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a geopolitical designation that includes countries and communities not considered Arab (e.g., Iran, Kurdish peoples) despite their geographic proximity to Arab nations and their shared histories of Western colonialism.[16] Moreover, many scholars consider the term "the Middle East" a colonial nomenclature and prefer to describe the region as Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA).[17] Still, one might reject ethnic or geographic markers as too monolithic or sweeping altogether and opt instead to discuss national formations—such as Egyptian or Iraqi.[18] When im/migrant and refugee populations are factored in, one's relationship to Arab as an identifier might change altogether. Asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants might all have different and complex relationships to either national or ethnic signifiers. Their own understanding of their identity is further mitigated by how they are hailed upon their arrival in a new place. For example, many who leave Arab nations and reside in the US diaspora are variably read as Arabs, Arab Americans, Muslims, and/or Muslim Americans; they might be classified as Black, Brown, or white.[19] Like others not born in the country in which they reside, their path to citizenship can be complicated by anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment.[20] All these factors make "Arab" an ambiguous and difficult term to apply to a community or body of literature in general.

I find the overlaps and antagonisms within Arabness useful to demonstrate that Arabness is produced not only in one location or another, but in the movement, tension, and in between. I take a transnational approach to thinking Arab identity, one that is committed to unseating Orientalist

and nationalist renditions of Arab identity that produce essential, authentic Arab subjects. *Between Banat* looks at Arabness not only in relation to non-Arab nations, but Arabness as it is produced between Arab national constructs. An emphasis on Arabness as a between, produced in relation and exchange, begins a slow process of detaching Arab identity from national or state identities and encourages us to consider how we understand an Arab cultural identity for its many stateless subjects. My positioning of Arab as a moving, transnational configuration builds on Arab and Arab American feminist thought. In *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, the editors note that for many Arabs, both in Arab nations and diasporas, home exists on a continuum.[21] They describe their choice to use "Arab and Arab American" simultaneously to demonstrate the discomfort their writers and interlocutors feel with either/or formations of identity and experience. I too locate Arabness neither in Arab home nations nor in their diasporas, where diaspora can refer to Arabs outside Arab nations but can also refer to Arabs displaced to other Arab nations. In *Contemporary Arab-American Literature*, Carol Fadda-Conrey argues that Arab Americans' transnational circuits are central to their configuration of Arab identity. Like Fadda-Conrey, I employ Arabness as relational and transnational in order to demonstrate the agential ways Arabs negotiate and imagine their cultures and communities amid the violence that surrounds them.[22] Arabness is relational between Arabs and non-Arabs, but betwixt as well. It is transnational insofar as Arabness crosses, circulates, and changes within Arab nations. I further suggest that the transnational circuits do not only impact Arabs in the diaspora, but that the circuitry informs construction of Arabness in Arab nations. It is not only Arab Americans that are formed in the transnational circuit: Arabness itself is in the shifting current, the ongoing dialectic between here and there, between discourses. Thinking about Arabness as a transnational relation allows us to think about the significance of multiple nationalities for Arabs. It similarly describes the cultural and social ways that Arab life takes place across and through multiple kinds of borders. Thus "transnational relation" describes not only a national multiplicity in Arab histories, but the multiplicity of Arab cultural experiences. In this, I aim to evade some of the traps of transnational formations elucidated by critics like Leela Fernandes that illustrate how the transnational might sometimes reify a US-centric project.[23]

Additionally, foregrounding Arab as a transnational relation and formation allows us to recognize the uneven and imperialist ways racialization has impacted Arab identities. I work here, especially in chapters 1

and 3, to show how Arabs themselves engage in processes of racialization that uphold white supremacy via anti-Blackness. In her work on 1920s Syrian Americans, Sarah Gualtieri highlights the ways Arabs are ambiguously racialized and how that racialization impacts their citizenship.[24] This articulation is explored for contemporary subjects in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, where the editors and essays attend to anti-Arabness as a racialized formation.[25] At the same time, I am conscious of how Arabness often disappears Black Arabs, or forms Arabness via opposition to Blackness in order to come closer to whiteness.[26] This is the case for diaspora Arabs, but also for Arabs in their Arab nations. Safia Elhillo writes, "So much of the thinking behind the horrific treatment of South Sudanese by the 'Arab' Arabophone North stems from the false binary of Blackness/Arabness that aspires to pursue an Arab identity by erasing the Black one. So much of the thinking behind the flourishing industry of skin-lightening creams in Sudan, so much of the thinking behind the derogatory term 'ʒirig,' meaning Black blood or African blood—it all comes from this legacy of anti-blackness tied up in the word 'Arab.'"[27] Rayya El Zein notes in the introduction to a special forum on cultural constructions of race and racism in MENA/SWANA regions that many non-Black MENA/SWANA communities are "grappling with the historical legacies of European colonial violence and neo-imperialism in the shape of the global war on terror, [and] have struggled to also recognize the local and regional lineages of empire and colonialism that continue to dispossess and discriminate racially in the region."[28] Both Elhillo and El Zein highlight how we must continue to interrogate and unsettle our understanding of the word "Arab" and of Arabness. *Between Banat* insists on a relational Arabness to foreground racialization and to consider Arabness without reifying anti-Blackness.

Arab is not a fixed category that describes sedimented cultural practices or peoples, but rather a relationship between people and their shared cultures. Queer Arab subjects, particularly women, index the circuitry of Arabness itself, revealing how notions of Arab identity in multiple locations are impacted by Orientalism, coloniality, nationalism, and heteronormativity. Within these meta-narratives emerge distinct strands, such as anti-Blackness, authenticity politics, homonormativity, and respectability politics. Queer Arab critique foregrounds that Arabness is constructed through gender and sexuality. Queer Arab subjects are discursively overwritten and invisibilized via the multiple discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and nation that surround them.

Queer Arab Critique

This book employs queerness as a method, a practice, and a subject position one occupies with regard to normative sexual power structures. Queer Arab critique is the method and practice by which we reveal queer Arab subjects. Through it, I argue that queer subject formation in Arab contexts is distinct from precolonial renditions of Arab homoeroticism and Western articulations of sexuality. Queer Arab critique helps undermine the centrality of Western nation-states in queer of color discourses, challenges Arab nationalist paradigms that erase queer subjects, and brings women to the center of queer Arab studies.

Studies of nonnormative sexualities in Arab communities are few. Many are historically driven and emphasize sexuality in relation to Islam, for example, Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arab Islamic World*. Others are regionally specific, like Sofian Merbet's *Queer Beirut* or Jarrod Hayes's *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb*. Few focus explicitly on women. There are Samar Habib's two projects: *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East* and *Arabo-Islamic Texts on Female Homosexuality: 850–1780 A.D.* We might also look to Sahar Amer's *Crossing Borders: Love between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literature*.[29] While useful grounding for this study, all three use a historical approach and only speculate on current iterations of same-sex desire between women. *Between Banat* picks up the thread of these studies by shifting to a contemporary focus, by invoking transnational Arab positioning, and by emphasizing women. The use of diverse language in these titles (homosexuality, queer, love between women) also hints at a concern across all our studies: How do we name or narrate same-sex desire, practices, or identities in Arab contexts?

Recent scholarship on the topic, in queer studies broadly and in Arab critique specifically, is concerned with how queer subjects might be caught between difficult binaries that foreclose their possibility: first, the sexual binary of heterosexual and homosexual, and second, the Orientalist constructions of East and West. While some Arabs do claim identity categories like gay or lesbian, many more organize their sexual desires and practices in ways that are not readily legible in either frameworks of gay and lesbian identity or Arab nationalist articulations of sexuality. What I mean by this is that nonnormative gendered and sexual practices are part of Arabs' lives, but the people practicing them might not claim the identities available and associated with such practices, such as lesbian, gay, sahaqiya, or shaatha. The latter terms,

"sahaqiya" (a word some translate as "lesbian") and "shaatha" (a word that some translate as "abnormal"), might be overwritten with negative connotations. For the former, queer Arab subjects might not check off benchmarks of LGBT identity common in Western cultures. Lisa Duggan describes the normative trajectory and narrative for Western LGBT subjects as homonormativity.[30] Many Arab subjects are not homonormative—they might not be "out" or have a "coming out story." Many might be in same-sex relationships without naming them lesbian or gay. For these reasons, I avoid using lesbian, gay, or homosexual to describe same-sex practices in Arab contexts.

Tensions around the heterosexual and homosexual binary are complicated by the prescription of moral, political, and social values to Arab sexualities by Orientalism and by Arab responses to it. Numerous discourses circulate about Arab sexualities that make it difficult to locate same-sex desires, practices, and identities. Hanadi Al-Samman and Tarek El-Ariss write that there is a standstill in current studies of Arab sexualities that turns "into a premodern Eastern versus modern Western-oriented division. While the East is studied as a repository of tradition with an identifiable sexual and amorous nomenclature, the West is often presented as a fixed hegemonic structure distinct from the East . . . this division has generated a set of binaries pertaining to the applicability of terms (gay, lesbian, homosexual) and theoretical frameworks (queer theory) to Middle Eastern literary and cultural contexts."[31] Accordingly, some scholars consider the use of identity categories like lesbian or homosexual out of line for Arab subjects because of their association with the West. Jasbir Puar uses the term "homonationalism" to describe how homonormativity becomes an object of imperial and Orientalist activity in SWANA regions.[32] Homonationalism also describes how homophobic and heteronormative nations like the United States are framed as exceptionally free and democratic because of their sexual liberation. Joseph Massad names the apparatus of homonationalism—Western imperialism and exceptionalism around gay subjects—the "Gay International." The Gay International includes both the discourses about it and the structures that mobilize those discourses. Massad also suggests that LGBTQ identities could be inappropriate for Arab subjects precisely because of their historical inaccuracy and association with colonialism and imperialism.[33]

At the same time, Arab nationalist paradigms often disavow nonnormative sexualities as inauthentic to Arab culture. We can look to national crackdowns on queer life in Egypt, Lebanon, and other Arab nations as examples. LGBTQ activism and scholarship on it has evidenced how Arab national projects champion normative sexual and gendered identities, desires, and

practices as one means by which to establish an "authentic" Arab subject. For example, Liat Kozma argues that the late nineteenth-century anticolonial nationalist project in Egypt defined itself against Orientalist discourses via articulation of specific gendered and sexual politics.[34] Deniz Kandiyoti suggests Arab reformers refashion the nation via recourse to "traditional" cultures.[35] Nadine Naber studies this practice in the United States via Arab Americans, who articulate normative gendered and sexual scripts as one way to resist assimilation in the diaspora. Naber calls this the politics of cultural authenticity.[36] In both instances, a rejection of queerness is thus an assertion of "traditional" Arab culture as the basis for anti-Orientalist Arab identity. To highlight how the cultural politics of authenticity operate in the Arab nations as well as in their diasporas, I use the shorthand "heteronational." Heteronational refers to normative sexual and gendered discourses based on allegedly precolonial values that emerge as responses to colonialism and Orientalism, in an attempt to restore an authentic Arab subject fit for the postcolonial Arab nation. While these concepts—homonormativity, homonationalism, Gay International, heteronational—are useful to name Orientalist discourses that inform Arab sexualities, they also make it difficult to imagine or make space for Arab subjects who are indeed engaged in homoeroticism or same-sex behaviors.

Recent scholarship turns to queer and queer of color critique to manage this discursive logjam. Queer of color critique elaborates a model of theorizing that actively attends how sexuality is informed by other facets of difference. In *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson suggests that queer of color critique "interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, class with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices."[37] Amal Amireh notes that using "queer" in relationship to Arab culture is often framed in one of two ways—as a capitulation of Arab cultures to neoliberal identity politics or as a means to discuss organizations and performances of same-sex eroticism that are significant to and emergent within local cultures and histories.[38] Routing queer through transnational feminist and queer of color engagements undermines the insinuation of the former and grounds us in the latter. The history of colonization and Orientalism alongside the ongoing globalization of economies and cultures makes imagining an Arab subject hermetically sealed from the influence of the West impossible. Queerness in Arab contexts is always about local cultures and histories at the same time that it is about the global location of these cultures. I follow precedent set by recent scholarship on this topic and use queer, first, "not as a field with a delimited object of study (such as homosexuality or even sexuality), but as an analytic, a meth-

odology, a critical sensibility, a conceptual strategy, or a reading practice."[39] Second, queer names modes of gendered and sexual interactions that resist or challenge heteronormative ideals but are (usually) not codified through a sexual identity.[40] I include under this articulation of queerness displays of homoeroticism, nonnormative gender performance, ambiguously oriented lust, and more.

Thinking about queerness as a relation to power is indebted to Cathy Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Real Radical Potential of Queer Politics?"[41] In the essay, Cohen resists structures that recommit queerness as a binary opposition to heterosexuality and instead asks us to think about how nonnormative subject positions can be the basis for progressive coalitional politics. This is especially salient for Black, Indigenous, and people of color who might not identify with queer and/or LGBT identities and who might be perceived as heterosexual, but are very rarely heteronormative. Building on this necessary reframe of queerness, I use queerness to denote that which resists and subverts heteronormative Arab cultures, rather than looking for categorical LGBT identities.

Between Banat uses queer of color critique couched in transnational feminist frames. As noted earlier, current examples of queer of color critique in Arab contexts tend to study men and desire between men. As Rodríguez notes, heteronormativity and misogyny often evacuate desire from female subjects, or dismiss it as insignificant.[42] When desire happens between women, it is easily disappeared or overlooked because it fails to manifest in homonormative iterations. Though many texts can attest to the minimization of Arab women's lives and (same-sex) desires, I offer here some anecdotal evidence: as of this writing, each time I have presented my work an audience member has asked why I study Arab women and not Arab men and has implied the study lacked rigor because of its focus. Others have suggested that the book would not have an audience or gain interest because it examined only desire between women. As such, one of the primary feminist gestures of queer Arab critique is its investment in what happens between women and an unwillingness to disregard the femme and feminine as always already hegemonic.

My thinking in this book is guided by other queer of color and transnational feminist projects. In order to make possible women's seemingly *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath brings together "postcolonial feminist scholarship on the gendering of colonialism, nationalism, and globalization, with a queer critique of the heteronormativity of cultural and state nationalist formations."[43] In her introduction to *Thieving Sugar*, Omise'eke Natasha

Tinsley considers the many kinds of names that one might use to understand homoeroticism between women in the Caribbean, including queer by way of transnational queer critique, and settles on women who love women, in order to avoid the culturally specific examples (like lesbian) as well the identity politics that attend to such identities.[44] Though they arrive at different names, both Gopinath and Tinsley center women's bodies, desires, and practices to bring gender to the foreground as a significant axis in the formation and articulation of sexual subjects.

Queer Arab critique holds Arab women's bodies, desires, and practices at its center. Via the study of Arab women, I emphasize queerness's mutability, shape-shifting, and diffuse operations. Focusing on women reveals different kinds of queer forms, queer practices, queer ways of being. It requires different kinds of queer archives. To locate desire between women, Rodríguez, Tinsley, and Gopinath all turn to other kinds of evidence—gestures, homosocial spaces, homoeroticism between seemingly heterosexual subjects. They also perform different kinds of readings: gestural, ephemeral, affective. In short, centering women necessitates alternate queer archives and queer methods, alternate stories and alternate tellings. Queer Arab critique begins with women as the catalyst and develops archives and methods accordingly.

Women and Femininity

Between Banat disrupts the oversignified category of "Arab woman" through use of the transliterated Arabic term "banat" (بنات) to refer to its subjects. It also challenges stereotypical modes of representation for Arab women and considers how Arab femininity is normatively rendered and how queer subjects can use femininity to reject heteropatriarchy.

As I have argued, how we name and articulate gender and sexual nonnormativity offers us an opportunity to rend power from Orientalist and heteronational scripts and prioritize the voices of queer Arab subjects. Through attention to language and narrative, queer Arab critique positions queer Arab sexuality as neither a derivative or assimilationist version of the West, nor a failed Arab subjectivity. The ambivalence around naming gender identity, while not as central to the book as a similar ambivalence around naming sexuality, certainly haunts it. Though "Arab woman" seems like a simple enough label, I was struck in my research by how many queer subjects expressed discomfort with it. This was similar but not collapsible to their uneasy experience with

various names for sexual identities. Sometimes this discomfort was evident not in exposition wherein a writer or character considered their gender identity, but in the ways they narrated women at large: in their proximity or distance to the idea of women, in their articulation of what and who constituted womanhood. Many of the texts under consideration in this book feature writers or subjects who identify in varying degrees with the category "Arab woman," insofar as it describes their gender identity, and use multiple terms to name that experience. This includes cis and trans women writers and/or characters depicted. It includes those who express feelings of gender nonconformity or nonbinary gender identity. It includes young women, girls, and elders. For example, in chapter 4, many collections devoted to Arab women's voices feature writers that reject the identity "woman" to describe their experience but find value in understanding their position within society as people presumed to be women or forcibly policed into hegemonic femininity. This is to say, they narrate their experiences of sexism through the analytic category of woman. Some subjects in this book find use in gathering under the sign of woman even as it fails them.

In Arabic, many of the words that describe "woman" hold different connotative meanings. For example, بنت (bint) is the Arabic word for girl, daughter, or feminine child, but it is used in many texts to signify infants to adolescents, young Arab women, and adult Arab women, or to describe normative discourses about Arab femininity (e.g., in Christina Atik's "مش حلو لبنت" / "It's Not Nice for a Girl" discussed in chapter 5). Bint occurs more frequently in representations of Arab femininity than its formal and older counterparts نساء (nisa') or امرأة (imra'a), and certainly more than classed سيّدة (sayyida/lady). I use bint (and the plural banat) precisely because of its frequent invocation and multiple significations. The choice to use bint and banat is also indebted to Evelyn Shakir's groundbreaking ethnography of Arab and Arab American women, *Bint Arab*. Shakir's project centers Arab and Arab American women's voices in order to unsettle Orientalist visions of them. Finally, banat finds ancestry in the collection وقفت بنات (*Waqfet Banat*), an anthology about queer Palestinian women produced by أصوات (Aswat), a queer and women's activist organization in Palestine. *Waqfet Banat* was the first time I had tactile, permanent evidence that other queer Palestinian women existed, and that I could hold their stories. I discuss *Waqfet Banat* at length in chapter 4. Like Shakir and Aswat, I use banat to call my familiars; I sustain its use to emphasize the different kind of story/telling the book performs. Banat Arab are kin, and this work amplifies our creative and powerful stories of survival.

I also use banat because "Arab women" is at once an overfull signifier and an empty one. It is mutually constructed by Orientalist paradigms and anti-Arab sentiment, and Arab heteronationalisms. In Orientalist constructions, Arab women occupy one of three types: the silent and veiled Muslima; her hypererotic, "revealed" counterpart in the form of the harem girl or belly dancer; and lastly, the female terrorist.[45] As *Orientalism* tells us, the first two characters are a production of colonial fantasies: the former is the oppressed subject who necessitates imperial intervention; the latter is the stage on which imperial desires play out.[46] The first figure contributes to the construction of white saviorism and demonization of Arab culture that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as "white men saving brown women from brown men."[47] The veiled woman is, notably, silent. Lila Abu-Lughod notes that the physical object of the veil and opinions about it—is it freeing? is it oppressive?—become the central focus of conversations about Muslim women, and subsequently the actual lived realities and voices of those subjects disappear.[48] Alsultany notes how anti-Arab racism post-9/11 mobilized this figure anew and produced her as a sympathetic yet still silent object.[49] The second figure, the belly dancer or harem girl, constructs the Orient as a sexually deviant space where women's bodies are available for consumption. At the same time, the hypersexual Arab woman's availability is not a product of the woman's desires, but, as Amira Jarmakani notes in *Imagining Arab Womanhood*, a figure that bolsters the construction of Arabs as exotic and erotic others.[50] The hypersexual Arab woman is simultaneously a testament to Arab men's hypersexuality; their savage lust requires a harem of sexually available women. In both cases, the silent and the sexual, Arab women are not subjects but objects. They are capable of manifesting neither voice nor desire. These two figures exist alongside a third: the female terrorist in the form of hijacker or suicide bomber. The trope emerged primarily in the 1980s and into the 2000s, when plane hijackings and suicide bombings became strategies for armed resistance in Palestine and elsewhere. Though seemingly agential, Amireh argues that this figure is also coopted into the Orientalist clash of civilizations and reveals both the lack of Arab women's agency (they are allegedly duped into participation) and the inhumanity of Arab cultures that communicate through violence and martyrdom.[51]

At the same time, Arab femininities are mobilized by Arab nationalist paradigms that are responding to colonialism and attempting to construct an independent Arab state that rejects, overcomes, or disregards such Orientalist typification. Therese Saliba writes that although some nationalist struggles have offered women a platform to challenge normative practices within their

communities, the use of women's liberation as a justification for imperial activity often produces a reactive response that sees women and femininity as spaces in which Arabs might "return" to an authentic, precolonial culture, the process I named earlier as heteronational.[52] As Minoo Moallem notes, in both Orientalist and nationalist responses, women's bodies become flat signifiers rather than agential subjects.[53] *Between Banat* rejects both the Orientalist framing and the heteronational response to articulations of Arab femininity and sexuality by centering Arab women's texts, lives, and voices. Though I use my first chapter to further outline how queer Arab women's stories are foreclosed by competing discourses, the remaining chapters emphasize how queer subjects exist and resist in expansive ways. Each subsequent chapter reckons with how queer subjects interrogate and challenge femininity and womanhood via their sexual desires, practices, and identities.

Significantly, *Between Banat* challenges the construction of femininity as always already a capitulation to heteropatriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality. In both Arabic and English texts, femininity is collapsed onto women's bodies through its normative compulsions. In many examples femininity functions to inform and help police the category of woman; in these examples femininity refers to a position in patriarchy, circumscribed by heteronormativity, binaristically defined against masculinity—what Raewyn Connell calls "emphasized femininity."[54] Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson offer a recalibration of Connell's formulation to attend to hierarchal organizations within femininity that are informed by intersections of race, sexuality, class, ability, and so forth.[55] Mimi Schippers defines "hegemonic femininity" as "the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."[56] Where hegemonic forms exist, so too do counterhegemonic forms. In my first chapter, I take care to unpack the hegemonic form of Arab femininity as modeled in Scheherazade, a femininity that prescribes heterosexuality and precludes queer subjects from representation. In later chapters, however, many characters and writers lay claim to femininity, deploying and embodying it in ways that resist normative gender and sexuality. By this I mean that either their performance of femininity is imagined independently of a masculine binary, or that the feminine desires, practices, and politics that are produced position femininity as a mobilization against heteropatriarchy rather than against men or masculinity. In *Between Banat*, many subjects occupy femininity as a subject position in order to reject and resist heteronormativity. I attend especially to instances where femininity becomes a foil for

queer potential to flourish: where femininity and homosociality pair and produce space for intimacy, homoerotic desires, and nonnormative sexual practices. I borrow this strategy from Gopinath's *Impossible Desires*, where she argues that homosocial and home spaces were sites for women's desires.[57] The femininities discussed in *Between Banat* do not uphold heteronormativity as much as they are embodied in sensual acts against it. In the book, I ask that we consider and reconsider our understanding of femininity as a counter to masculinity that reifies the gender binary and suggest instead that it is a dynamic concept produced and appropriated by multiple kinds of subjects. Inasmuch as *Between Banat* makes and unmakes queer archives, it calls us to make and unmake femininity.

The book also attends to femme figures in Arab contexts. In queer critique, femme refers to performances of femininity by queer subjects. As Rhea Hoskin and Allison Taylor write: "Beyond an identity, femme is an enactment (Maltry and Tucker, 2002), a politic (Serano, 2013), an erotic (Nestle, 1992), an adjunctive or noun (Bergman, 2006) and a critical analytic, which requires bringing the multiplicities of femininities into focus (Dahl, 2017; Hoskin, 2017b, 2018, 2019). As such, femme potential ought not to be reduced to an aesthetic—or, perhaps, even an identity."[58] Hoskin and Taylor define femme in a similar fashion to how I define queer: as a potential identity and an analytic that allows us to see how gendered and sexual normativities are challenged. Femme can also usefully name how some subjects perform femininity but do not identify with or desire to be understood as women. In this way femme, like banat, offers us a means to mark subjects who evade the oversignification and evacuation of "queer Arab women."

The hyperpositionality of the subject "queer Arab women" is undone by attention to subjects who challenge each of these positions: who are not considered "properly queer" because they don't claim a lesbian or gay identity, who perform Arabness without recourse to authenticity politics, and who perform femininity and womanhood in provocative, nonnormative ways. Arab femininities and women's subjectivities are also constituted in the between: between various ethnic, racial, and national discourses; between the various physical sites and virtual texts of the book; between the temporal landscape that begins with thirteenth-century Scheherazade and ends with contemporary transnational artists; and last, but not least, between the multiple performances and rejections of femininity and sexuality discussed. *Between Banat* chooses to look beyond heteronormative surfaces for gestures, intimacies, and ephemeras that occur within femininity and enable other kinds of femininities and sexualities to emerge. By attending to the lives,

loves, and traces of banat, women, and femmes, I create a new kind of queer archive. At the same time, the ambiguity and ambivalence that undergirds these subjects unmakes the archive in favor of imagining new ways of existing for queer Arab futures.

Languages, Genres, Mediums

As the previous sections articulate, this study has the tricky work of discussing several contested subjects (queer, Arab, women) whose contestations are central to it. In this section, I discuss how the selection of terms used and the objects studied are part of the argument of the book itself. Namely, language selections reflect the relationality I emphasize in the construction of queerness and Arabness; they also mark the particularity of queer Arab critique. Moreover, the multiplicity of languages, genres, and mediums in this book undergird the book's commitment to producing fluid, relational, and productive queer Arab archives.

I use queer to refer to subjects who perform nonnormative femininities and sexualities, and as an analytic to consider a subject's relationship to heteronormativity. When I say "Arab queers" I am referring to trans and cis Arab women, femmes, and those Arabs who identify with femininity or the social subject position of woman, if not the identity of "woman" per se. In deference to how many subjects name and understand themselves, I also use the transliterated term banat. I believe the visual and sonic disruption of banat on the page reminds us that Arab womanhood is produced in constant tension with colonial and national discourses about Arab women. In the case where a writer or character is explicitly named or identified by markers of cis, trans, nonbinary, or femme, I use the language the text provides. I acknowledge my own failure to be more explicitly inclusive and articulate regarding moments of trans and nonbinary representation, while at the same time respecting how some trans and nonbinary subjects in Arab communities prefer their gender, like their sexuality, to operate without definitive naming.

Between Banat thus offers multiple configurations of queer Arab subjectivity and uses multiple modes of reference to represent the diversity and fluidity of its subjects. I have chosen not to produce or select a single word to account for the superfluity or resolve the tension these words conjure. I cannot, nor do I politically desire to, identify with certainty each writer or character's gender or sexual identity. I choose to work with the sticky languages that exist; I stick with sticky language for several reasons. Neither "queer" nor

"women" nor "femininity" captures the complexity of operations happening under their sign. Arabic versions of these terms similarly fail. The choice to work within the limited language available rather than engage in neologisms is about protecting obfuscation as a strategy and rejecting the impetus of categorization itself. New terms will not make those operations transparent, because it is impossible to ever make the intersections of such words clear without creating new exclusions. At the same time, by maintaining signifiers like queer and femme, those who have some attachment to or intrigue regarding such signifiers might find themselves in these pages.

In addition to mining language's failure, *Between Banat* chooses to allow obfuscation and refusal, to resist naming, translating, or making concrete queerness or women or femininity. The right of refusal and defiance and the right to privacy are often denied Arab subjects, particularly in an Orientalist colonial project, which demands unveiling and discovery. Some Indigenous scholars suggest Indigenous communities resist absorption into settler states through practices of refusal or defiance.[59] Here, refusal narrates some of the ways this book and the subjects therein reject Orientalist, colonial, and assimilationist narrations of Arab gender and sexuality. There are refusals in the specific texts studied, and in the book in general, to scopophilic Orientalism, to unveiling, to men as subject and center, and to the discursive oversignification of religion in Arab cultures. *Between Banat* and many of its subjects refuse a tidy narration of their identities and, in so doing, resist assimilation to Orientalist and heteronational paradigms. There will not emerge from this book "an Arab lesbian history" or a singular narrative about "what it's like to be an Arab lesbian" or a common set of tropes with which to simplify queer Arab identities. Instead, my goal is to present works that resist easy categorization, works that produce rupture in the very categories they seek to represent. As Muñoz writes in "Thinking Beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique," refusal can be a productive gesture that animates queer horizons.[60] By diverting our focus from expected, singular representational tropes, *Between Banat* brings to bear new ways of living.

Since "between" is the central location of this book, I study subjects and objects that feature relationality as a primary ethos, and I toggle between many kinds of texts. By invoking multiple genres, mediums, and languages, I foreground a relational articulation of queerness and Arabness rather than one anchored in a singular "authentic" cultural practice, text, or geographic location. The breadth of texts and their linguistic, national, and generic diversity requires constant stitching and illustrates the relational nature of queerness in Arab cultures. Through stitching, I suggest Arabness is itself

a relational quality or subject position. The texts surveyed here travel back and forth in time and across Arab geographies and diasporas. They do so because Arab peoples travel, and because our understanding of Arabness, of Arab people, is formulated in tension with the many ways Arabs have been understood and understand their identities in history, particularly in their interactions with imperialism and their resistance toward it. I tread across language and genre because queerness takes all kinds and appears everywhere. In so far as I configure Arab as a transnational identity, I also consider queerness in Arab cultures to be produced at a transnational intersection in which Arab and non-Arab iterations of Arab gender and sexuality are created and contested, usually with specific political aims. Exploring the discursive restraints on queer representation reveals how representations of gender and sexuality are configured via racial and national discourses. The transnational and queer frame of this project pushes against those limiting discourses and makes space to see and consider gender and sexual nonnormativity in Arab cultures.

In the chapters that follow I attend to work in Arabic, English, and Arabish, the language between Arabic and English. I include literary work in multiple genres: fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and autobiographical essays. I analyze Arabic language films as well as prints and graphic novels. I have surveyed texts that are considered mainstream and widely accessible, like Golden Era Egyptian films, alongside works that are more intimate and written for small audiences, like essay collections by a queer women's activist group in Palestine. I have considered texts that are widely translated and available, like *The Thousand and One Nights*, as well as texts that operate outside a linguistic medium, like contemporary prints and graphic novels published by diasporic art collectives. By including multiple genres and languages, I aim to expand the field of signification and provide the most opportunities for queer Arab women, femmes, and banat to emerge.

Another strategy of this work is to employ multiple mediums in the construction of queer Arab critique and in the production of its archive. As I noted earlier, the field of representation for Arab subjects, and women especially, is densely oversaturated and simultaneously evacuated of content. I oscillate between the linguistic and the visual because in some cases the visual relieves the pressure to name, a pressure that haunts the linguistic. In some film and art, facial expressions, gestures, or moments make known what the verbal language fails to adequately capture. As earlier, I turn to queer of color critique's emphasis on the ephemeral and gestural as sites of queer becoming. At the same time, the visual is not exclusively freeing. As the earlier discussion

regarding Arab women archetypes attests, visual registers can essentialize and bind. Neither is language only a realm of restriction. Language can shift and surprise us, as chapter 4 demonstrates.

Between Banat produces queer Arab critique and pursues queer Arab archives through different kinds of story/telling. The diversity of texts in this book offers multiple opportunities to consider and imagine queer Arab subjects. The textual diversity also invites comparison, an opportunity to emphasize the relational as the central location of the book. I demonstrate how multiple texts exist and converse in relation to one another. The analysis oscillates between verbal and visual registers, and it does so intentionally to escape the discursive restrictions of each medium. Its focus on queer subjects foregrounds how Arabness and queerness are formed in relation and offers us new models for analyzing both. Finally, *Between Banat* is primarily written to study texts by queer Arab subjects rather than texts produced about them by others. It emphasizes women's, femmes', and banat's voices.

Toward Queer Arab Critique and Queer Arab Archives

In their introduction to *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* the editors ask, "What would analyses of race, gender, sexuality and nation look like if we were to center Arab and Arab American women, queer, and transgender experiences?"[61] *Between Banat* takes this question to the heart of its inquiry and argues that by centering queer women, we articulate Arabness as a transnational relation, we produce a mode of queer of color critique that is appropriate to transnational Arab subjects and resists reification of colonial or heteronational modes of queer subjectivity, and finally, we locate strategies to make possible queer presence and futures.

The procession of my analysis unfolds over five chapters. While the book proceeds in a mostly linear fashion regarding time, it moves constantly through language and location. It also resists a teleological trajectory and instead emphasizes the ambivalence in the subject's articulation of their sexualities, and the ambivalence of the archive at large. Chapter 1 is the only chapter that I consider pessimistic in nature; it details the obstacles and discursive foreclosures to seeing and imagining queer Arab subjects. Chapter 2 outlines strategies for locating queer Arab desire amid mainstream, hegemonic texts and provides the operational strategies of queer Arab critique. Chapters 3 and 4 examine contemporary articulations of queer Arab life by Arab writers that defy queer erasure and demonstrate how queer critique challenges the

many normativities, violences, and manifestations of imperialism and heteronationalism in Arab cultures. Chapter 5 studies visual mediums and film to outline three strategies for queer futures—a practice I call sahq. Sahq uses the methods of queer Arab critique and the record of its archives to think about the necessary conditions for a queer future.

Chapter 1, "A Thousand and One Scheherazades," names the discourses that limit the production and visibility of a queer Arab archive through a study of normative Arab femininities as translated in the figure of Scheherazade. The study of Scheherazade illustrates how Arabs are transnational subjects, how gender and sexuality become sites of racial and ethnic negotiation for Arabs, and how Arab femininity is over- and underwritten by Orientalism, heteronormativity, and heteronationalism. To do this, I offer a literary history of the pan-Arab storyteller Scheherazade. I analyze the figure of Scheherazade within the frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights* and in contemporary Arab American literature to articulate how Arab femininities are manipulated to serve the interests of Arab national programs as well as Orientalist and anti-Arab immigrant paradigms. At the same time, the chapter reveals how writers reckoning with Scheherazade's troubled legacy attempt to reclaim and reorient her narratives. This chapter is grounded in literary theories regarding minority canon formation and critical ethnic studies, and uses close readings of the literature to outline the limiting discourses that inform and frame depictions of femininity and women's sexualities in transnational Arab cultural production.

Despite the limitations outlined in chapter 1, there are ways to locate and read queer Arab subjects in normative Arab cultural productions. My second chapter, "Between Women," develops queer Arab critique as a methodology and toolkit for locating queer women's desires. To read queerness in texts that are not explicitly or transparently queer, I argue that we must attend to queer spectatorship; queer space and time; homoerotic triangulation; and queer containment. These four strategies of queer Arab critique are the methodological foundation upon which the remainder of the book is predicated. In the chapter, I examine two films from the Golden Era of Egyptian cinema, a nostalgic and celebrated site of Arab cultural production. I read the popular films against their heteronormative grain to reveal how even mainstream texts allowed alternate femininities and homoeroticism between women to emerge. Queer Arab critique refutes the discourse that queerness comes from Western colonization and is therefore inauthentic to Arab culture. Instead, the films function as archival evidence of same-sex desire and eroticism between Arab women. I draw on queer of color critique and transnational

feminist scholarship from the SWANA region to decenter the United States in queer of color critique and to prioritize an Arab and specifically in this case Egyptian cultural context. At the same time, I attempt to ground my critique against Orientalist sensationalism by articulating the many cultural levels and references within which the films operate.

While chapter 2 examines mainstream texts where queerness moved in ephemeral, gestural, and unnamed ways, chapter 3, "Longing in Arabic," studies three Arabic-language novels where characters and their same-sex desires are explicitly named with known identity categories like "lesbian." Through their direct representations, I argue that the novels produce a queer story/telling more expansive than the identities named suggest. I show how the novels narrate a community history of queer Arab women, banat, and femmes; how they reject essentialist articulation of queer Arab identities; and how they produce robust criticisms of Arab heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity. Specifically, the texts ask us to consider the significance of ableism, anti-Blackness, socioeconomic status, and imperial and state violence as intersecting concerns for queer Arab subjects. The chapter discusses how an explicit naming of sexual identities unfolds for the characters, and how the characters in the novels respond to their overwritten sexualities. The regional specificity of the novels (which take place in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) allows us to explore how local and national normativities impact queer Arab life. At the same time, by considering the role of genre and the novels' multiple audiences, I suggest that the works have a broader transnational readership. The chapter thus makes and unmakes a queer Arab archive by insisting on the history and presence of queer Arab women in Arab cultures and rejecting a categorical representation of banat's loves and lives. A secondary argument of this chapter is that Arabic novels are a potentially queer and feminist literary form.

Chapter 4 builds on the ambivalent archive of the previous two chapters by examining three collections of autobiographical writing by queer Arabs, collected and published by two queer activist organizations in Palestine and Lebanon. While the previous chapter examined how the genre of the Arabic novel made space for queer women's intimacies and interiorities, "Love Letters" challenges the notion that the Arabic language itself forbids or erases queer sexuality. I argue that writers in these collections manipulate Arabic and English to offer new ways of seeing and thinking queer life. I offer a close reading of the naming practices writers use in these texts to move us toward a contemporary vocabulary for queer Arab subjects, one that evades, challenges, and upturns the restrictive discourses from chapter 1. As in the

previous chapter, chapter 4 argues that we can look to our own communities for strident and intersectional critiques of Arab heteropatriarchy, imperialism, and occupation. Taken together, chapters 3 and 4 look toward how Arab cultural formations and the Arabic language both empower and foreclose queer Arab subjectivity. From queer stories, Arabs can locate useful critiques and interventions into heteropatriarchy, respectability, and nationalist paradigms. Chapter 4 thus makes evident that queer Arab life is not only present and possible but begins to imagine what must be undone to ensure queer futures.

My concluding chapter, "Sahq," discusses film, prints, and graphic novels that imagine otherwise. It asks: What do we need for Arabs to be queer and OK? In it, I argue that queer Arab futurity necessitates a rejection of respectability and authenticity politics and relies on the formation of transnational collective communities to resist imperialism and violence. To describe these measures, I recruit the Arabic term سحق (sahq). I define sahq as an embodied form of queer Arab action and world-making that holds at its center the tenets of transnational collective organizing, rejection of respectability politics, and refusal of cultural authenticity as the central metric of Arab identity. Sahq serves queer subjects and eases the pain heteropatriarchy and normativity visits on all bodies. The texts in this chapter use sahq to create moments of pleasure and joy in the representations of queer life. The texts directly challenge normative representations of gender and sexuality in Arab culture and attempt to disrupt and educate Arab communities against homophobia and misogyny. Through the texts in the chapter, I suggest that the creative and political labor of banat and femmes—their sahq—offers transnational Arab subjects a guide map for a free and joyful queer future.

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In *Between Banat*, queer Arab women, banat, and femmes are not only a part of Arab history, active voices in the Arab present, but they are the visionaries of joyful Arab futures. The journey of this book is thus threefold: First, to outline the multiple discourses and obstacles that obfuscate queer Arab subjects, particularly for banat. For queer Arab women and femmes, the horizon of possibility is egregiously eclipsed by essentialisms and nationalisms that abject queerness from Arab culture, by ongoing Orientalist erasure of a mobile and shifting Arab culture, and by blatant anti-Arab, misogynist, and homophobic sentiment in the Arab world and its diaspora. Yet despite the discursive and material threats to queer Arab life, it persists. As such, the second aim of this book is to demonstrate the presence of queer Arab life in

heteronormative spaces and catalogue how queer Arabs animate and narrate themselves. I establish queer Arab critique as the mode by which we can archive queer histories and presents. Queer Arab critique is located in the between; I define both Arabness and queerness as relational concepts in constant movement between transnational, diasporic, and Arab national circuits. Queer Arab critique centers banat and emerges from the between of transnational feminist thought and queer of color critique. Finally, drawing on artists and creators who are both aware of the limiting discourses that frame queer Arab life and committed to representing it with joy and pleasure, the book discusses the strategies and activisms necessary to hold and create queer Arab futures, with banat at the center.

notes

Introduction

1 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 8.
2 Ahmed, *The Promise*, 121–59.
3 Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims*, 71–99.
4 Georgis, "Thinking Past Pride," 233–51.
5 Nash, *Black Feminism*, 1–32.
6 Cvetkovich, *An Archive*, 1–14.
7 Arondekar, *For the Record*, 3–4.
8 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures*, 6.
9 Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 6.
10 Arondekar et al., "Queering Archives," 213.
11 Arondekar, *For the Record*, 20.
12 Hartman, "Venus," 11.
13 This phrase comes from Scott, "The Evidence."
14 This phrase comes from Spivak, *In Other Worlds*.
15 Naber, "Introduction," 5.
16 Shohat and Alsultany, "Cultural Politics," 20.
17 For a discussion of the shifting name and political valence of such terms, see Cainkar, "Fluid Terror Threat, " 27–28.
18 As evidenced by countless studies that situate their research within the nation-state as subject.
19 The flattening of the national and ethnic diversity of the SWANA region to Arab and Muslim only is strident in the United States, particularly after 9/11. For commentary on this, see Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber, *Arab and Arab*

American Feminisms; Chan-Malik et al.,"A Space for the Spiritual"; and Asultany, *Arabs and Muslims.* For more on the racialization of Arabs in the United States specifically, see Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*; and Jamal and Naber, *Race and Arab Americans*.

20 For an example outside the United States, we need look no further than France and its Islamophobic ban on veils.

21 Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, xxiv.

22 Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary*, 24–25.

23 Fernandes, *Transnational*, 6.

24 Gualtieri, *Between,* 2.

25 Naber, "Introduction," 30.

26 Amin, "Anti-Blackness."

27 Elhillo in Alsous et al., "Beyond the Land," 187.

28 El-Zein, "Introduction"; for more from this forum, see: https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/.

29 El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality*; Merbet, *Queer Beirut*; Hayes, *Queer Nations*; Habib, *Female Homosexuality* and *Arabo-Islamic Texts*; Amer, *Crossing Borders*.

30 Duggan, "The New Homonormativity," 187–90.

31 Al-Samman and El-Ariss, "Queer Affects: Introduction," 205.

32 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxv.

33 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 16–62, 48–50.

34 Kozma, *Policing Egyptian Women*, xv–xvi.

35 Kandiyoti, "Some Awkward Questions," 271.

36 Naber, *Arab America*, 44–48, 63–65.

37 Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 139.

38 Amireh, "Afterword," 635.

39 Baron and Pursley, "Editorial Foreword," 203.

40 Kuntsman and Al-Qasimi, "Introduction," 2.

41 Cohen, "Punks."

42 Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures*, 13.

43 Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 16.

44 Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar*, 7–10.

45 Kahf, "The Pity Committee," 111–12.

46 Said, *Orientalism*.

47 Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 21.

48 Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women*.

49 Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims*, 71–99.

50 Jarmakani, *Imagining Arab Womanhood*, 3–4, 45–49.

51 Amireh, "Palestinian Women's Disappearing Act," 33.

52 Saliba, "Arab Feminism," 1089–92.

53 Alarcón, Kaplan, and Moallem, "Introduction."

54 Connell, *Gender and Power*, 184–85.

55 Pyke and Johnson, "Asian American Women."

56 Schippers, "Recovering the Feminine Other," 94.
57 Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 15.
58 Hoskin and Taylor, "Femme Resistance," 282.
59 See Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal"; Teves, *Defiant Indigeneity*.
60 Muñoz, "Thinking Beyond," 826.
61 Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber, *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*, xxxi.

Chapter One. A Thousand and One Scheherazades

1 Since "Scheherazade" is transliterated, it is open to multiple spellings. I use "Scheherazade" unless I am directly quoting a source with another spelling.
2 *The Thousand and One Nights* is sometimes referred to or translated as *The Arabian Nights*. I use *The Nights* here for ease and consistency.
3 Burton, *A Plain and Literal*; Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights*.
4 Naber, *Arab America*, 81–82.
5 Said, *Orientalism*.
6 For more on how Orientalism invokes gender and sexuality as sites of regulation for "Eastern," specifically Arab, bodies, see Said, *Orientalism*; Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*; Massad, *Desiring Arabs*; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*; and Boone, "Vacation Cruises."
7 I chose these two translations because of their prominence in the translation history of the Nights. *The Nights* as we know them now, a collection of magical realist folk tales over which Scheherazade presides, only appears in collected, written form in the second half of the thirteenth century. The thirteenth-century manuscript was copied and regenerated for subsequent renditions and is considered the "authentic," albeit now lost, form. It contained the frame story of Scheherazade and approximately eleven other stories that occur over the course of two hundred and eighty-two nights. Two versions of *The Nights* grew from this historical seed, one Syrian and one Egyptian. The Syrian copy is kept in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, while the Egyptian version proliferated endlessly, often deviating in dramatic ways from the Syrian and, consequently, from the thirteenth-century version. The content in *The Nights* shifted considerably in the Egyptian edition during the period of Ottoman reign, which is often considered a waning of Arab culture and traditions. The travel of the manuscript to the European context would alter the stories even more, particularly in the hands of the first French translation, performed by Antoine Galland in 1704. Galland collaborated with Hanna Diab in 1709 to add approximately twelve new stories to the collection, most famously, the stories of Aladdin, Ali Baba, and Sinbad (Haddawy, *The Arabian Nights*, xvi). It is due to this dilution of *The Nights* in the Egyptian context that many scholars of the text refer to the Syrian copy at the Bibliothèque nationale as the most authentic version of the text and thus the most referential of Arab culture. Eventually, the collection would make its way into English based on the success of Galland's French translation, most famously