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HAUNTING THE BARZAKH:  
THE WARTIME ÉMIGRÉ IN GHĀDA AL-SAMMĀN'S *AL-QAMAR AL-MURABBA'*

**Abstract**

Ghāda al-Sammān has written several novels on the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). In this essay, I extend the analysis of her war writings through close readings of her short story collection, *Al-qamar al-murabba'*, published four years after the war's end. Where previous critical responses to her work have primarily concerned her articulation of a Levantine feminism, my analysis heads in a different direction: I explore her characterization of the lived experiences of Lebanese émigrés who, like her, have relocated to Europe amid, or in the wake of, civil war. Drawing upon sociological and psychoanalytic conceptual frameworks of haunting and the uncanny, as well as theological and anthropological illustrations of the *barzakh*, I argue that the experiences of al-Sammān's characters serve not as evidence to substantiate any one contemporary theorization of war, displacement, and the psyche, but as an aperture through which readers may critically re-engage them all.



Syrian journalist, essayist and novelist Ghāda al-Sammān was born in 1942, three years before Syria's war of independence. She came from a literary family: her mother was a writer and her father was a professor who also served as minister of education. In 1964, al-Sammān moved to Lebanon to pursue a master's degree at the American University of Beirut. While she was out of the country, Syria's new Ba'athist government sentenced al-Sammān to imprisonment in absentia for leaving Syria without permission. She spent the next few years between London and Beirut, working as a journalist and writing what would become her trilogy on the 1975–1990 Lebanese civil war: *Bayrūt 75* (*Beirut 75*; 1974), *Kawābīs Bayrūt* (*Beirut Nightmares*; 1976), and *Laylat al-milyār* (*The Night of the First Billion*; 1986).<sup>1</sup> During the late 1980s, al-Sammān made her permanent home in Paris and it was from here that she composed, in Arabic, the collection of short stories that are the subject of this paper, *Al-qamar al-murabba'* (*The Square Moon and Other Supernatural Tales*; 1994). The protagonists of these stories share much

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of her own history: most are Levantine émigrés who have relocated to western European capitals; many are women; many were newspaper editors or journalists.

To date, critical responses to al-Sammān's stories have underexplored the connection that she draws between haunting and the physical displacement of the Lebanese wartime émigrés. Instead, her oeuvre, including *Al-qamar al-murabba'*, is usually analyzed in terms of a politics of Levantine feminism, reflecting a crucial effort on the part of scholars of Arabic literature—most of them also women—to bring attention to the political and social import of novels produced by Arab women writers amidst the multiple sociopolitical upheavals in the region during the late-twentieth century. These now canonical corrective historiographies were published in the late 1980s and 1990s,<sup>2</sup> although contemporary scholarship continues this legacy.<sup>3</sup> This particular short story collection, for instance, has been portrayed as illustrative of a specifically Levantine feminist diasporic practice of preserving “lost traumatic knowledge” for future generations.<sup>4</sup> Hanadi al-Sammān situates Ghāda al-Sammān among a generation of women who breathed new life into cultural figures which once represented the personal and feminine, such as Shahrazad, by rendering them in overtly political terms. In so doing, she argues, they responded to the authoritarianism of Ḥāfiẓ al-'Asad or the tumult of the civil war in Lebanon in a manner that defied “conventional narratives of personal and national erasure.”<sup>5</sup> Some critical work on al-Sammān has also highlighted the influence of certain literary styles in her writing. Her choice to write her master's thesis on the theater of the absurd in part reflected both the rapidly changing pre-civil war conditions in Beirut and the successive coups underway in her own homeland. In this way, al-Sammān helped extend the style beyond the region of and moment of its provenance: much as the wartime fiction and plays of Kafka, Genet, and Beckett offered bleak existentialist commentary lamenting the collapse of communication and human relationships in the post-World War II era, so, too, did this genre prove apt for comment upon the Levant in the 1960s and 1970s. Surrealism, a representational mode intimately connected to the theatre of the absurd, also pervades al-Sammān's war trilogy *Bayrūt 75* (*Beirut 75*; 1974); *Kawābis Bayrūt* (*Beirut Nightmares*; 1976); and *Laylat al-milyār* (*The Night of the First Billion*; 1986). Tapping into a common trope used to portray the experience of life amid the war, her novels are replete with anthropomorphized animals, the macabre, and magical realism.<sup>6</sup> They formed part of a

literary landscape that established Lebanon in this moment as “the stage of surrealist horror theater.”<sup>7</sup>

One of the most compelling characteristics of literature, however, is that it can be reconsidered in light of the context in which it is currently read: thus, in the wake of multiple conflicts that have recently swelled the ranks of various diasporas, *Al-qamar al-murabba'* might also be mined for comment upon the precarious position of the Levantine émigré who has resettled in Europe. Al-Sammān imagines her main characters as living ghosts whose bodies may have escaped Lebanon, but whose minds and souls reside somewhere in between Lebanon and the European capital that is to become their home. These characters belong to both spaces and neither; they trudge distractedly through bleak landscapes while their psyches are embroiled in conflicts tethered to a past from which they are irreparably removed. These portrayals of her characters and their limbo-like existences suggest haunting. As I define haunting in relation to this text, I draw upon Sigmund Freud's exploration of the uncanny, or the *unheimlich*. If somewhat hesitantly, Freud suggests that aesthetic—including literary—representations of uncanny phenomena are endowed with a special ability to account for what is most unsettling about life, especially when it appears to take on an otherworldly quality. I also draw upon Avery Gordon's notion of haunting as those elements of lived experience which exceed the neat distinctions of our vocabulary, especially the discipline-based labels under which we seek to sort human life. In Europe, and even at home in Lebanon, al-Sammān's characters face a climate that appears incapable of making sense of the stories and experiences they carry with them. In the stories for which I present close readings, this lack of understanding is illustrated through the diagnostic (in)abilities of the figure of the doctor. Although the medical and psychological explanations doctors provide account for some portion of the maladies affecting their émigré patients, they fail to do so completely. As a result, the conditions of the patients—intimately “tied to historical and social effects” (and causes) of war and displacement—are indecipherable until they can be interpreted in a different light.<sup>8</sup>

This precarious status is what suggested a reading of these stories informed also by the *Qur'ānic* concept of the *barzakh*. Sunni *Qur'ānic* scholar and philosopher, Ibn al-‘Arabī, defined the *barzakh* as “an activity or active entity that differentiates between two things and (paradoxically) through that very act of differentiation provides for their unity,” such as the space-time between life and death.<sup>9</sup> The

concept of the *barzakh* has been used throughout the *Qur'ān*, the *ḥadīth*, and the *tafsīr*, to describe “the intermediate state models of pilgrimage, purgation, and most especially, soul-sleep”: it is a state that is endemic to conditions defined by movement, transition, and liminality, making it eminently well-suited for use as a lens through which to interpret stories about ghostly immigrants.<sup>10</sup> I draw upon the writings of Salman Bashier and George Archer, for their explication of the *barzakh*, and on Shahla Talebi, for the provocative connection she draws between *barzakh* and illness, specifically insanity—the latter being an ailment that doctors in al-Sammān’s tales consider as they try to define their patients’ maladies. Talebi’s conceptualization of the *barzakh* in relation to madness, however, helps to supplement that which medical science attempts to account for on its own. While the disciplines from which I borrow over the course of my analysis are varied—sociology, psychoanalysis, theology, and anthropology—in the contexts in which I introduce them, these disciplines, like al-Sammān’s fiction, are immediately concerned with human experience and the question of its representation.

Finally, my analysis is also implicitly informed by attention to the lived experiences of al-Sammān and her peers. Though al-Sammān penned the majority of her fictional oeuvre while in Europe, *Al-qamar al-murabba'* was the first of her fictional collection relevant to the Lebanese war to be written about Europe. Unlike the novels of al-Sammān’s war trilogy, the Levantine homeland in *Al-qamar al-murabba'* is relegated to the domain of memory: ever-present yet not fully accessible. This is a transition of significance not only for al-Sammān’s fictional characters, but also the real-life generation of émigré Levantine writers of which she was a part: Jean Said Mākdisi, a Palestinian academic who left Lebanon to publish her war memoir, characterized her experience as a “living death” which produced mental landscapes in which “the muddled past, present, and future become all tied up together.”<sup>11</sup> Hudā Barakāt, the Maronite Lebanese author of the acclaimed novel *Ḥajar al-ḍaḥīk* (*The Stone of Laughter*; 1990), similarly expresses ambivalence about her status as an émigré author. More than a decade after the war’s end and her return to Paris, Barakāt spoke candidly of her attempts to excise some of her troubled relationship with her homeland through the act of writing:

As soon as I get on the plane for Beirut my throat constricts . . .  
I’ve invented an innocence about my village so that I can spend

time there peacefully. I can't seem to calm my emotions and that's why, for the past 13 years, I've been writing about Beirut to try and level off these feelings. But it doesn't seem to work.<sup>12</sup>

The ambivalence cuts both ways. While Barakāt attests to the difficulty of looking back at the homeland after a period of displacement, Shi'i Lebanese author Ḥanān al-Shāykh, author of *Hikayat Zahra* (*The Story of Zahra*; 1980), articulates her struggle to be fully present in London, her new city of domicile:

Place helps you to assess yourself—it's the best way to think about and to know who you are . . . I have to be away from a place in order to write about it . . . That's why it took me so long to write about London. I used to feel that, although I was living physically in England, psychologically, I was still living in the Arab world. It was only when I was commissioned to write a short story about London that I realized I had so much [to] say about this country. Then I wrote two plays about exiles and immigrants in London.<sup>13</sup>

For al-Sammān to write about the war as she did in her trilogy, she, like Barakāt, required a spatial remove from Lebanon. But to write about life in Europe, as she did in the stories that are the subject of this article, like al-Shāykh, she needed a temporal remove. Thus, as Ibn al-'Arabī's conception of the *barzakh* would suggest, the two geopolitical spaces which comprise the poles of al-Sammān's Lebanese literary worlds necessarily helped constitute each other through their very difference. This is not an argument for the intentional fallacy whereby readers are to understand al-Sammān's protagonists as lightly coded auto-representation.<sup>14</sup> Rather, the distinct literary tropes she uses to render the experience of the wartime Lebanese émigré in Paris should be understood as an exploration of a condition to which she, too, is subject. Her text is meta-narrative: at once a reflection on the relationship between space and time for the new transnational subject, and an on-the-ground meditation on otherworldly life.

One of the stories included in the collection, "The Other Side of the Door," concerns Layla, a former newspaper editor in Beirut, who relocated to Paris with her husband, Na'im, and son, Shaker, immediately after the war's end. Layla was only ten years of age when

the war began. She marries Na'im mid-war and gives birth to their son in the bomb shelter in which they sought refuge. In a cruel twist of irony, the impact from "the last shell of the war" resulted in the partial paralysis of her young son (145).<sup>15</sup> The Parisian doctors to whom Layla took her son for treatment concluded that in the time between his initial paralysis and his medical visits, his body had healed. Now medically sound, his handicap, according to them, reflected nothing other than a lack of desire to walk. This diagnosis is the first indication of an uncanny presence: the material object and its resultant injury are no more, yet their impact remains in such a way that obstinately resists both a change in environment and the healing power of time. It is as if they linger not only *in spite of* but *because of* the cessation of the war and the family's escape to Europe. Lest the reader hasten to explain the child's apparently clean bill of health by concluding that the doctors must have erred, the language of al-Sammān's prose offers up no reason to doubt the credibility of the doctors or the accuracy of their assessment. In her literary world, we are intended to take at face value the facts with which we are presented—regardless of how unsatisfactory they may seem at first pass. In fact, Freud acknowledges the particular ability of literature to force a confrontation with the uncanny; literature accomplishes this by demanding that the reader accept as true whatever is "within the world represented in the tale."<sup>16</sup> By taking the experiential world of the protagonists at face value the reader encounters an aperture through which to apprehend life under unfamiliar, unhomey conditions.

The key to understanding the son's haunted condition lies in the parents. Na'im is distressed by his family's impoverishment in Paris: the only home his wages can support is a "suffocating room" in a flat too much like the underground shelter in Lebanon in which the family took refuge (154). He feels as if the shrapnel which temporarily wounded his son also "broke [the family's] back," simply propelling them from "shelling by fire [in Beirut] to shelling by poverty [in Paris]" (149). Layla is described as "lonely, fragile, and spiritually weak" (147). In one scene, she feebly steers her son's wheelchair through the "grayish evening snow" that falls around her. Her path is precarious at best. She slips and slides on the ice, constantly at risk of losing her grasp on her son's wheelchair and sending him spiraling down the streets. As she struggles, she feels as if wintry Paris's snow is "falling—in her heart, under her skin . . . in her blood system . . . in her throat, making her feel almost suffocated." She thinks of herself as "a cripple pushing a cripple" (149). Moving aimlessly through the metropole, she is

humiliated by the stares of Parisians whose nonverbal communications make it clear that she does not belong. Tormented by what-if scenarios that could have saved her family in Lebanon, she contemplates suicide (145).

Neither Na'im nor Layla are able to inhabit Paris without thinking of, and somehow making co-present, their tortured lives in Beirut: the Parisian flat is still simultaneously a Beirut bomb shelter, and the handicap of the son in Lebanon has become a handicap to the mother in France. They have not been able to start over. With such evocative language, al-Sammān invites us as readers to feel our way towards Layla and Na'im's condition—to feel ourselves slipping, cold, fearful, handicapped by the burden of safeguarding a child whose life has been irrevocably changed and whose path forward is as unclear as our own. Layla and Na'im live in the *barzakh*, and without meaning to, they have so burdened their young son with the force of their sorrow, that the healing of his original, physical wound has simply given way to psychic malaise, in an intergenerational transmission of catastrophe.<sup>17</sup>

One day, a family friend and fellow Lebanese émigré, Bobos, arrives at the family's apartment. He finds Layla and Na'im engaged in a vitriolic argument. Astounded by the tension filling their tiny apartment, Bobos laments that their son has inherited a "legacy of darkness" from parents who have become "two ugly and frightening ghosts" (152). His language is at first puzzling: Layla and Na'im are very much alive. Bobos's meaning, however, is that although the couple survived the war, they live life as if they have no futures—only pasts. In Paris, rather than sharing in what should have been a new life with their son, their attentions remain trained on memories of, and emotional investments in, an irretrievable place and time. Their inability to form a healthy relationship to their memories of Lebanon renders them unable to put down roots in their new environment. They remain somewhere in between their two landscapes: haunted by what they have lived through, they end up haunting the physical spaces they inhabit, and those with whom they share them. Their child's continued paralysis, therefore, is a metaphoric sign of haunting as he, too, remains suspended between two worlds.

But Bobos himself is also a sign of haunting. Throughout the story, he dedicates himself to lifting Shaker's spirits and introducing joy to his life as the parents struggle to find their way back to an equilibrium. Bobos's own story line, however, ends in a mysterious manner. One day, as Shaker celebrates his birthday, finally full of joy

and surrounded by friends, gifts arrive. They are from Bobos. It is unclear how or when they arrived since no one has seen Bobos arrive or depart, and no deliveries have been made on his behalf. The parents soon find out that Bobos's conspicuous absence was due to a sudden motorcycle accident which killed him while he was en route to deliver the gifts. Layla and Na'im struggle to understand how the gifts could have materialized without the giver. They wonder aloud, quietly, so as not to disturb their son, whether Bobos might have been a ghost. As it turns out, in the world of this story, he is. But his ghostly influence also takes on another meaning. Writes Avery Gordon:

The ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. . . . The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will, and always a bit magically, into the structure of a feeling of a reality we come to experience not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, Bobos brought into stark relief the danger that the parents posed to themselves and to their child. Writes Salman Bashier, "In the presence of the *barzakh* meanings are embodied and spiritual entities are manifested in corporeal forms."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, that Bobos — as ghost, as symbol of Layla, Na'im, and Shaker's haunted and haunting lives, and, as sign of a meaning they had yet to apprehend — took a form that appeared real is appropriate. He was a messenger but also the message itself. There was a lesson to be learned in the space of the *barzakh* and Layla and Na'im would remain there until they learned it.

It is this ghostly meaning with which Lebanese professor and artist Walid Sadek suggests survivors of the Lebanese civil war learn to walk. In a concept he characterizes as "lingering with the corpse," Sadek suggests that living productively with ghostly remnants of the past is a prerequisite to truly transcending war and transitioning to peace.<sup>20</sup> Sadek's pronouncement was of paramount importance in a supposedly post-conflict era marked with renewed, if episodic, violence, and which often threatened a return to full-scale civil war. In such an environment, Sadek wrote, a corpse never seems to fully disappear. Though uncomfortable, he says, it is for the best: "The



presence of the corpse is a challenge . . . to those who may find themselves, willingly or inadvertently, lingering with the corpse in a stay which opens into another temporality and a set of concomitant questions regarding what sociality may remain or is still plausible."<sup>21</sup> That which has been lost through death and destruction, he means to say, maintains its presence long after meeting its material end, reminding us of its presence by virtue of its infringement on our experience of linear time. The process of moving beyond the moment of this rupture can only be initiated once an individual stands with intention in the halted time zone enacted by the break—the *barzakh*, I would suggest—for a period of time long enough to process loss. Sadek's proposition anticipates the possibility of renewed relations with oneself and with others. Distinguishing the act of lingering with the corpse from Freudian constructions of mourning (and a more dangerous melancholia) he argues that remaining "in the presence of the corpse is not directed toward freeing the bereaved subject from attachments to a lost object but rather is a working through the corpse towards others and of rebuilding a living sociality."<sup>22</sup> This is to say that the corpse acts as the medium through which we reconvene with those whose lives have also been shattered. It allows an atomized community to re-form. Avery Gordon's concept of meaningful ghostly haunting echoes this logic: "Following the ghosts," she writes, is the process of "putting life back in where only a vague memory or bare trace was visible."<sup>23</sup> Both Sadek and Gordon's theorizations are ethical demands for post-catastrophic life.

What would lingering look like for wartime émigrés like Layla and Na'im? What could it achieve? It would free them from the purgatorial condition of feeling like a shadow of themselves, belonging to no particular moment in time or place on earth. More importantly, it would prevent them from stripping their son of a future before he has had a chance to see it for himself. It is no coincidence that this realization only takes hold upon Bobos's intervention: Bobos's life in Lebanon before his emigration signals that he, too, shares the "corpse." He, however, models what life looks like on the other side of the *barzakh*, having stepped into a condition of possibility that enables his own futurity and allows him to extend community to those who still wander in limbo. He offers a warning: the wrong kind of lingering can turn you into the very ghost of the corpse you encountered. Once Layla and Na'im have understood this warning, Bobos can disappear.

If the story of Layla and Na'im suggests ghostly haunting as a condition of potential for émigrés inhabiting the *barzakh*, and holds out

the possibility that the two may ultimately escape their limbo, al-Sammān's "The Plot against Badi'" offers a crushing narrative of one who remains trapped. Badi', the protagonist, was born and raised in Lebanon. While still a child, his father died, leaving the child and his mother to fend for themselves as the war took root. To provide for them, Badi''s mother turned to prostitution. Though young, Badi' understood the significance of "uncles" arriving to visit his mother at sundown. Wrestling with his own fear and anger, his emotions were stoked to a fever pitch by the vitriol of his schoolmates who advised him to preserve his honor by killing his mother.

Badi''s mother did in fact die, albeit at the hands of a militia sniper. Scarred by this second loss, Badi' convinced himself that it was his fervent desire to see her punished that was responsible for her death. As his despair grows, he meets and develops a relationship with his twin, 'Idab. Unlike the mild-mannered Badi', 'Idab has a tendency toward violence that initially takes the form of disturbing pranks on his mother's clients but ultimately becomes more dangerous. His presence in his brother's life corresponds to Badi''s increasing bouts of paranoia and nervousness, an intensifying condition that summons terrible headaches and nightmares. Concerned, his grandmother asks Badi' to commit himself to a sanitarium in Beirut. Upon arrival, doctors inform him that he suffers from a split psyche which has created the wholly imagined personality of 'Idab—the palindrome of Badi'. Badi' is diagnosed as schizophrenic, though his doctor opines that while his patient certainly has the potential for violence, he is "not mad" (42).

The diagnosis is highly unorthodox. While some of the behaviors Badi' exhibits are associated with schizophrenia, the doctor's diagnosis fails to account for the most important characteristic of his malady: the presence of 'Idab. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, an international source of standardized diagnoses, describes the symptoms of schizophrenia at length—including delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, and diminished emotional expression. These symptoms, however, do not include the presence of another personality or personalities.<sup>24</sup> In fact, the insertion of this latter symptom into the equation of clinical psychology generates a new diagnosis: "dissociative identity disorder," formerly referred to as "multiple identity disorder." The mental illness is an adaptive response to "overwhelming experiences, traumatic events, and/or abuse occurring in childhood."<sup>25</sup> Yet, both schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder are considered manifestations of psychosis (in which one's mind-life is decisively at

odds with reality), making Badi' definitively what the doctor has said he is not: mad. The insufficiency of the diagnosis becomes more pronounced as the reader follows Badi''s life in Europe after his emigration: burying himself in uncontrollable rage, he cedes more and more of his mental and emotional energy to his violent "twin." With each step Badi' takes towards his climactic downfall, coworkers, love interests, and even strangers who surround him become ill at ease in his presence, unable to put a finger on what it is about him that is so disturbing. Finally, he commits an act of double murder. The murder enacts the metaphoric death of Badi' and the unrestricted reign of 'Idab.

In light of this conflict, how might we read al-Sammān's troubled protagonist? I suggest that trying to place Badi' on the spectrum of in/sanity insufficiently accounts for the nature of his experiences in al-Sammān's literary world. The concept of the uncanny proves useful here. According to Freud's view of psychoanalysis, individuals belonging to primitive societies believed that "the double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self . . . 'an energetic denial of the power of death.'"<sup>26</sup> This supernatural entity manifested a primordial knowledge of the means of self-preservation in the face of imminent danger. According to Freud, so-called civilized societies dispelled this notion as unscientific, yet the original logic occasionally resurfaces in the psychic life of supposedly evolved peoples, as a trace. The concept of the double here becomes an eerie reminder of a repressed knowledge of death and survival. Frightening for its simultaneous familiarity and strangeness, it is therefore sublimated into the logic of psychosis. Interpreting Badi' and his mysterious twin according to the "primitive" logic of doubling, however, would suggest that Badi' has siphoned into a second personality those elements of his life that threaten his sense of self: war, his mother's prostitution, learned helplessness, and rage. By creating a double and halving his composite self, he protects himself.

However, this protection is only temporary. Badi''s instability advances precipitously until his sublimated anger and violent impulses become so strong that they ultimately overpower him. Under siege from a version of himself, Badi' retreats into the recesses of his memory, "running inside dusky gray corridors, from which emanated the fragrance of a bygone perfume" (49). He concedes his earthly life to his double, quite literally becoming his own ghost. Avery Gordon writes that spectrality, or ghostliness, is a sign of the process by which one becomes estranged from/a stranger to oneself: "When your

bearings on the world lose direction, the over-and-done-with comes alive."<sup>27</sup> For Badi', the process by which he loses his bearings can be discerned through his estrangement from himself, which is paralleled later in life, if not made more pronounced by, the estrangement caused by physical relocation.

If diagnostic terms that convey psychosis, or madness, should be considered at all, it is perhaps best understood in the context of the continuum formed by haunting, the *barzakh*, and death, a version of which he suffers when he allows 'Idab to take over. "The connection between madness and death seems strange," writes Shahla Talebi. "They appear so close and related yet simultaneously detached from each other" insofar as both suggest an absence from the earthly world, yet to different degrees."<sup>28</sup> "While the world of death shuts its door on the living, madness ruptures the soul as the body continues its existence," she continues.

Madness touches death's fiery fingertips, flies on its wings, and climbs up its doorstep but does not totally enter into its world. The dream of death fills the gap in a shattered world and the pieces through which a mad person travels. That is how madness and death come face-to-face at the crossroads of an unknown other world.<sup>29</sup>

For those whose experiences have been so isolating and catastrophic as to generate madness, they retain one foot in the world of the living, and one in the world of the dead—becoming of both and of neither realms, simultaneously. Thus do we find madness as uncanny as the supernatural: they are part and parcel of the same world.

In the final selection I have chosen from al-Sammān's short story collection, "The Brain's Closed Castle," the unnamed protagonist describes himself as a "mercurial ghost terrified by living human specters chasing me." His ghostliness does not bother him. In fact, he enjoys this kind of life-in-death: "I run away . . . and wander for a long time in a trance in a timeless nowhere" (199). The protagonist is not speaking of himself as a metaphorical living ghost, but actually believes himself to be a literal one: he tells us that he has died. Found out whilst having an affair in Europe, he lost his life to the strangling hands of a cuckolded husband. Recollecting the process by which he dies, he shares with the reader various realizations about human

nature, life, and death. However, in a disorienting twist, we learn that the protagonist is not, in fact, dead. He is an inmate in a sanitarium in Beirut. He returned home to Beirut from Paris when he received word that his father was on his deathbed. Not long after, he was committed to an insane asylum. His doctor corrects the protagonist's narrative about his life and supposed death, offering another version instead: "he is an expatriate who made a fortune [in Europe] and returned to Lebanon, then became crazy" (200). The doctor continues: upon the night of his patient's return, the patient found his father in "an old people's home . . . almost demented . . . [the father] ignored him or did not recognize him as he lay dying [which] shook the returning expatriate to the core and apparently created in him a terrible feeling of guilt and remorse" (201).

In Issa Boullata's English translation of *Al-qamar al-murabba'*, the doctor notes that the protagonist claims to be struck by "terrible pains that moved from place to place in his body [yet which have] . . . no physical cause; he was also the victim of a breakdown and chronic dejection, which is understandable in his case" (201). The patient's symptoms as written in the original Arabic, however, carry a subtler connotation. Here it reads: *la muḅrar ṭabīan jisdīan l-hā ʾila jānīb ānhiyār wa ḥuzn*—that there was nothing medically wrong with him aside from a breakdown and sadness.<sup>30</sup> Leaving aside the non-literal nature of the work of translation, the distance between the two characterizations of his condition is worth comment. In the original Arabic, the man's condition is described in terms that naturalize the emotional state he is in ("this is nothing aside from . . ."), and the use of "*ʾila jānīb*" establishes continuity between the man's physiological and emotional distress. Boullata's English translation, however, imparts a clinical tone that is missing in the original as he translates "*ḥuzn*" ("sadness") to "chronic dejection," or clinical depression. Making this distinction may seem an exercise in translational semantics. After all, whatever term is used to describe his condition, the person discussing them is yet and still a psychologist at a sanitarium, treating his patient with electroshock therapy and injections, according to the tale. However, the doctor acknowledges that his clinical diagnoses and treatments have been for naught. He determines that the language best-suited to account for his patient's disposition is not medical or clinical, but political and otherworldly: "He is now a citizen of the other shore and I cannot make him hear my voice, nor can I hear his. He thinks he is a ghost, says nothing, talks to no one, and thinks no one sees him" (201-2).

Abandoning medicine, the doctor turns to the creative arts—poetry, to be specific—as a means by which to better understand, and hopefully cure, his patient’s sudden break with reality upon his return to Lebanon. Here, we may recall that Freud, himself a doctor of the psyche, similarly finds that aesthetic means of representing the uncanny can restore knowledge that has been culled from the human senses. It is into this knowledge that the unnamed protagonist taps. The patient responds well to the doctor’s suggestion that he write poetry, submitting a piece entitled “I’m a ghost.” The nurse, reading the poem, laughs with recognition, explaining to the presumably non-Lebanese doctor that “Every Arab thinks he is a poet. This is a general case and is not limited to crazy people. Every Arab starts his life as a poet, then he becomes a struggling fighter, and then a realist or a madman” (201). The protagonist’s relocation from Lebanon to Europe would have physically distanced him from any political cause to which he had subscribed. His accumulation of wealth in Europe while his country is broken apart by war instilled a sense of guilt and betrayal. His father’s failure to recognize him upon his return made clear that he would not simply be able to undo the last several years—years in which he dug a permanent chasm between him and those he left behind. Now a stranger to his homeland, he becomes estranged from himself. The protagonist recalls his return to his natal village: his house was in ruins, which intensified his feeling of having become unmoored. He was a “miserable ghost . . . without a childhood or boyhood home to live in and haunt.” And, since “ghosts cannot build houses destroyed by shelling and buried by earth-moving machines,” his right of return has effectively been revoked, leaving him stranded (194). If there were any doubt about the tangible, political significance of precarious lived experience like the ones at the center of *Al-qamar al-murabba’*, the Beirut-based doctor, though at a loss for how to treat his patient’s condition, can at least be very clear about the condition’s implication. His patient embodies the worst of all possible outcomes of a relocated post-conflict life: his citizenship, as the doctor observes, now belongs to a domain neither Lebanese nor European, but to the *barzakh*.

The stories that al-Sammān writes are dismal. Her haunted *barzakh*-dwellers, Layla, Na’im, Shaker, Bobos, Badi’/’Idab, and the final protagonist, embody varying modes of relation to, and within, this space. Layla and Na’im, looking backwards towards Lebanon, face perhaps the most optimistic ending possible insofar as their story holds forth the possibility of rejoining a community of those who have safely transcended their limbo. On the other hand, Badi’ and the unnamed

protagonist represent more pessimistic forecasts: they are denied metaphorical asylum and are abandoned to a domain suspended between places and moments that they will never fully access. Al-Sammān's *barzakh*-dwellers live a life considerably harsher than the ones that Hudā Barakāt, Ḥanān al-Shāykh, or Jean Said Mākdisi describe in their interviews and memoirs: the stories of the former are meant to be illustrative, not paradigmatic. Such illustrations enable those fortunate enough to be unfamiliar with the post-conflict condition of displacement to obtain a stronger sense of what it entails, and perhaps find a better mode of relation to those who are subject to it.

Ranjana Khanna, whose early work advocated recognition of a form of melancholy specifically born of the colonial condition, notes that loss is "articulated itself in terms both of actual loss of life but also of political ideals and ways of being in the world. . . In the context of wartime displacement, we might ask what forms of nation could generate hostility and [on the other hand] hospitality."<sup>31</sup> For the postcolonial subjects in this collection, the ways in which life, political ideals, and ways of being in the world become lost are manifold, both as a result of the war (itself partially an enactment of a postcolonial tension) and as a result of a migration from the colony to the metropole. Al-Sammān's text suggests that the articulation of such a loss requires taking up a vernacular whose expressive and representative capacity exceeds the rigidity of accepted, "modern" categories in order to fully encapsulate the meaning of this lived experience.<sup>32</sup> For al-Sammān's characters—and perhaps for those for whom they are fictional stand-ins—the vernacular of the uncanny, haunting, and the *barzakh* seem more productive. "Haunting," writes Gordon, "is a constituent element of modern social life. It is neither premodern superstition nor individual psychosis" but something in excess of either and imminently present in the third space opened by war and immigration.<sup>33</sup> Thus, *Al-qamar al-murabba'* enacts a new lexicon as those who pen stories of the ghostly hauntings, like al-Sammān, "strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter memory, for the future."<sup>34</sup>

What I have offered in this article is a reading of the mode of haunting on its own terms, for what it allows us to access without recourse to a comparative project, while acknowledging spaces of overlap and contestation. Al-Sammān's characters' experiences serve not as evidence to substantiate any one contemporary theorization of

war, displacement, and the psyche, but as an aperture through which readers may critically re-engage them all. If anything, al-Sammān's work is illustrative of the plurality of ways of knowing. If madness is a condition endemic to the immigrant who seeks refuge from a war-torn society, and the negotiation of a doubled existence in the *barzakh* is the tightrope upon which a growing population of displaced persons must walk, perhaps what is insane is the condition, not the subjects living in them. What is mentally unstable is the logic and actions that give rise to these conditions, not the people who survive them. What is traumatic is the recognition of individual plurality, not a delayed processing of an event. And what is at stake is a matter of politics, about which we can do much, and not the inevitability of trauma, about which we can apparently do little.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kifah Hanna has recently argued for the inclusion of a fourth text, *Sahra tanakuriyyah li-l-mawtā* (*Masquerade for the dead*; 2003), making al-Sammān's trilogy a tetralogy. See: Kifah Hanna, *Feminism and the Avant-Garde Aesthetic in the Levantine Novel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 40.

<sup>2</sup> See miriam cooke, *War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996); and Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York: New York University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Radwa Ashour, Ferial Ghazoul, and Hasna Reda-Mekdashy, *Arab Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide, 1873–1999* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008); Hanan Sbaiti, "Ghada Samman's Beirut Nightmares: A Woman's Life," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32 (2009): 377–81; Christiane Schlote, "Street Lives, Roof Lives: Literary Transformations of Arab Urban Spaces after Mahfouz," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47, no. 5 (2011): 523–34; Rebecca Gould, "Engendering Critique: Postnational Feminism in Postcolonial Syria," *Women Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 209–29.

<sup>4</sup> Hanadi al-Sammān, *The Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writing* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>5</sup> al-Sammān, *The Anxiety of Erasure*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> See Pauline Homsy Vinson, "Ghada Samman: A Writer of Many Layers," *Al Jadid Magazine* 8, no. 32 (Spring 2002), <http://www.aljadid.com/content/ghada-samman-writer-many-layers>.



<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, "The Paramount Reality of the Beirutis: War Literature and the Lebanese Conflict," *The Beirut Review: A Journal on Lebanon and the Middle East* (Fall 1992): 70.

<sup>8</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 190.

<sup>9</sup> Salman Bashier argues that Ibn al-'Arabi contributed this particularly nuanced definition of *barzakh* in Salman Bashier, *'Ibn al-Arabi's Barzakh: The Concept of the Limit and the Relationship between God and the World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> George Archer, *A Place between Two Places: The Qur'anic Barzakh* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017), 8–9.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Said Mākdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (New York: Persea Books, 1990), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Olivia Snajje, "Author Talks about the Creative Process and Her Difficult Relationship with Beirut," *Daily Star* (Beirut), 4 March 2003, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2003/Mar-04/110854-author-talks-about-the-creative-process-and-her-difficult-relationship-with-beirut.ashx>.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Ball, "Things That Walk With Me: Ḥanān Al-Shāykh in Conversation," *Wasafiri* 26, no. 1 (2011): 64.

<sup>14</sup> In their 1946 essay, W.K. Wimsatt Jr. and M.C. Beardsley sought to dispel the notion that a reader could, or should, decipher a text to discern, after the fact, an author's intent at the moment of their writing. Readers who opt to do so, including those who seek to read autobiographical context into a fictional text, miss the opportunity to receive what organically comes from the text. See "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (July–September 1946): 468–88.

<sup>15</sup> Unless otherwise specified, I cite Ghāda al-Sammān, *The Square Moon and Other Supernatural Tales*, trans. Issa Boullata (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 137.

<sup>17</sup> See Marianne Hirsch's *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012) for a provocative exploration of the impact of the Holocaust on subsequent generations and the way in which traumatic haunting is made explicit through art and literature.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Bashier, *'Ibn al-Arabi's Barzakh*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> Walid Sadek, "In the Presence of the Corpse," *Third Text* 26, no. 4 (2012): 479–89.

<sup>21</sup> Sadek, "In the Presence of the Corpse," 482.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 485.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 87–88.

<sup>25</sup> American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 291–94.

<sup>26</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

<sup>28</sup> Shahla Talebi, *Ghosts of the Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 144.

<sup>29</sup> Talebi, *Ghosts*, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Ghāda al-Sammān, *Al-qamar al-murabba'* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Ghāda Al-Sammān, 1994), 216.

<sup>31</sup> Ranjana Khanna, *Asylum: The Concept and the Practice* (unpublished working manuscript, Duke University, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Several scholars of conflict, trauma and memory studies, and whose work is informed by postcolonial studies, have sought to find a more accommodating vernacular in their various geopolitical contexts. For two particularly good examples, see Veena Das, *Life and Words: Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), and Hamish Dalley, “The Question of ‘Solidarity’ in Postcolonial Trauma Fiction: Beyond the Recognition Principle,” *Humanities* 4 (2015): 369–92.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 22.