

such conditions affect our relationship to larger historiographical debates or even our views on the philosophy of history itself?

One might be so bold as to suggest that it is precisely through the experience of archival exhaustion that a different form of knowledge might be created. Rather than be lulled by the false transparency embedded in the excessive impulse to accumulate, what Mikhail provides instead is a musing on our “critical relation to our own archival and evidentiary desires.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, for example, in an experience to which so many of us who work on the Middle East can relate, Mikhail wryly remarks that after a mere week in the National Archives of the United Kingdom, he “left, quite proudly, with ten thousand photos,” only to have “cursorily read a few of these documents at the time” and, subsequently, “a scant few more. Slow thinking, understanding, and transcribing make for better historians than quick scanning, rapid checking, and partial reading” (p. 96). The brilliant assertion that “transcription is thinking and, ultimately, proves much more productive than the camera’s mass capture” (p. 96), then, is a lesson well learned amid the complicated bureaucracy known as the Egyptian National Archives.

doi:10.1017/S0020743824001065

## Arabic Glitch: Technoculture, Data Bodies, and Archives

Laila Shereen Sakr (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).  
Pp. 194. \$85.00 cloth, \$26.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503635883

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*Arabic Glitch: Technoculture, Data Bodies, and Archives* by Laila Shereen Sakr deftly remixes and traces the history of the Arabization of the Internet, critical virtual and material glitches that catalyzed the Arab Uprisings, and embraces Alaa Abdel-Fattah’s invitation and invocation to “fix your own democracy” (p. 4). *Arabic Glitch* is uniquely situated at the intersection of science and technology studies, theory and practice of contemporary digital art, data archiving and analytics, political mobilization, and Middle East Studies – provoking us to think in new ways about the emergence of vast data bodies that shape our contemporary lives and the importance of procedural literacy.

At the book’s core, Sakr asks us to center “the Arab uprisings as ground zero for imagining this (new) kind of global digital politics” (p. 15). *Arabic Glitch* draws on stories from Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, and more to disrupt popular narratives centering Western social media and technology as the catalyst for the Arab Uprisings, demonstrating how Arab techno-culture has informed and enabled decades of cyber activism. Sakr is not only the narrator of this story; she was an active participant in developing this early Arab technological landscape and is a contemporary digital archivist and algorithmic artist. Her story, and those of her fellow techie-activists, many of whom have faced severe state repression, is

<sup>2</sup> Brian Connolly, “Against Accumulation,” *J19: Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 2, no. 1 (2014): 172–179, 177.

interwoven into the story of the development of technological advancements in the Arab world. Sakr's alter-ego, VJ Um Amel, "mother of hope," also plays a central role in *Arabic Glitch*. VJ Um Amel is Sakr's way of "avowing various forms of embodiment" through the creation of a cyborg "free from biological, technological, or physical determinism" (p. 3). She actively amasses social media archives, processes vast amounts of information, and procreates by producing new outputs of data assemblages.

*Arabic Glitch* expands on the idea of the *glitch* as a slippage or loss of control that disrupts the system or status quo, exposing what lies underneath using the example of the Maspero Massacre. In October 2011, demonstrations erupted against the demolition of a church in Aswan, Egypt. Thousands of Coptic Christian protestors in Cairo marched toward the Maspero building, the headquarters of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union. State security forces brutally cracked down on protestors, killing more than two dozen people. While the state denied this narrative of events, eyewitness first-hand video footage posted in the Arabic blogosphere emerged to prove otherwise. This example demonstrates two *glitches* in the system revealing or making space for what is not meant to be seen.

The first is a *glitch* in the state provision of technological infrastructure in the neoliberal era of the 1990s, when Egypt connected to the Internet but did not develop a localized, regulated Arabic Internet ecosystem – platforms, software, language script, etc. This void in the tech-sphere was filled by digital activists who created Arabic-language processing tools, open-source software, and Arabic blogs that would be the spaces circulating images of state-denied massacres such as Maspero. The second *glitch* was the disruption of state and media narratives around the events of Maspero, as average Egyptians were able to upload first-hand media of state brutality to the Egyptian blogosphere, revealing a violent and repressive state spreading misinformation.

*Arabic Glitch* builds on the notion of the lack of separation between the virtual and the real, as seen in the creation and use of *data bodies*. Sakr argues that *data bodies*, which are the endless collections of stored data on individuals (credit scores, social media, medical records, and grades), inform our material lives. This collection of data bodies is fertile ground for state surveillance, but it also poses questions around the role of data in the future and the need for procedural literacy. For instance, VJ Um Amel shares her process of creating a futuristic game world set in 2111, where both humans and nonhumans are constituted from data. Artificial intelligence processes large bodies of data pulled from historical social media archives of the 2011–2013 Arab Uprisings to birth individualities and subjectivities through algorithms. The immersive experience uses these data sets to create a two-dimensional data visualization that integrates storytelling, historical data, and public space so that participants can affectively feel the historical moment.

*Arabic Glitch* also provides a history of the rise of the "techies" and the promotion of the Arab technical literacy that catalyzed and made space for the Arab Uprisings. Sakr gives proper recognition to those early techie-activists, including Alaa Abd el-Fattah, Manal Bahey el-Din Hassan, and Lina Attallah, who built the technical infrastructure of the Arabic Internet ecosystem and paved the way for others to follow. Sakr highlights the role of these techie-activists in building technological tools and software, developing Arabic scripts for the Internet, creating early chat rooms and blogs, and providing online spaces, such as *Tweet Nadwas*, for people to discuss ideas in the virtual sphere. *Tweet Nadwas*, organized by Alaa Abd el-Fattah, were events in which hundreds of Egyptian Twitter subscribers would gather in person and online to share their views on a particular issue – such as digital activism – on Twitter, the feeds of which would simultaneously be screened in a public space. This would be followed by rounds of open discussion encouraging members to address each other's comments. Alaa not only organized these events but also created a manual on how to organize them so that younger generations could host their own *nadwas*.

Sakr looks at how various data bodies or social media archives can be aggregated and operationalized using her development of R-Shief, a Twitter mining project, as an example. While data can be used to surveil and embolden inequality, it can also be used to gather information on specific moments or events in time, as seen in Sakr's tracking of Twitter conversations in Libya in 2011 and Gaza in 2014. Using aggregated data as an archive, she demonstrates how the archive can be used to create an immersive artistic experience that elicits feeling through an interactive mosaic of tweets and images. Sakr maps the emerging scene of algorithmic art, arguing that all this data from social media can be harnessed to tell an interactive story that shows both the whole picture and all the individuals composing it.

*Arabic Glitch* sheds light on how artists use the technique of the *glitch* within algorithmic art to create spatially embodied experiences that link artists and techies with political events, as well as demonstrates how the archive can be used as a text. For example, Sakr's exhibition, *Capital Glitch: Arab Cyborg Turns to D.C.*, centers itself in the Arab world, looking outward to the events in Washington DC on 6 January, as alt-right protestors stormed the capital. Using social media data pulled from Parler, VJ Um Amel uses a glitched mosaic model of assemblages to capture multiple sentiments in a single image using an algorithm. The author calls for *Arabic Glitch* to be used as a method to decenter Western narratives and argues for the need for procedural literacy, as we all need to understand how to navigate our new digital landscapes, which are no longer separate from the material.

Laila Shereen Sakr's *Arabic Glitch* brilliantly guides us through our current digital landscape, the impact of data bodies on our lived experiences and material realities, and re-centers Arab technological innovation in the story of the Arab Spring. Sakr provides scholars across many interdisciplinary fields with new groundbreaking frameworks, methods, and tools to archive, analyze, and represent data – making this essential reading.

doi:10.1017/S0020743824001090

## The Ottoman Canon and the Construction of Arabic and Turkish Literatures

**C. Ceyhun Arslan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024). Pp. 248. \$120.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781399525824**

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Over the course of the past decade or so, scholars of modern Middle Eastern literatures have begun making inroads into the discipline of comparative literature by comparing Arabic, Persian, and Turkish literatures not to Western literature but rather to each other. By redrawing the comparative map, these studies allow us to rethink the concept of world literature and especially to resist a default to the Anglophone, whether in the original or in translation. C. Ceyhun Arslan's *The Ottoman Canon and the Construction of Arabic and Turkish Literatures* “studies how the concepts of ‘Arabic literature’ and ‘Turkish literature’ emerged within a transnational context” (p. 23), sidestepping the problem of defining them in a framework of world literature and instead describing them in relation to each other in the late Ottoman context. Situating itself within the “burgeoning field of ‘Ottoman Arabic