Introduction

While “the World Is Beiruting Again”

When the [civil] war ended, it appeared that the things I was saying were too big. It’s like I used to dream more; now I dream less. . . . I wanted the war to end so I could fulfill my dreams. It ended, and then everything started appearing smaller and less significant.

—Hana, in Phantom Beirut

Beirut is Reliving its Golden Age: with an intensity to live that is strangely contagious and an energy that is nowhere else to be found.

—Paris Match billboard in Beirut, 2010

Beirut, whether it’s the Paris of the Middle East or not, might once again become a great city.

—Michael Totten, “Can Beirut Be Paris Again?”

We really can’t afford another war. We are exhausted. We already live in a state of everyday war. Anxiety and fear of the unknown, it causes depression, you know?

—Cab driver in Beirut, May 2019

In July 2009, the New York Times published an article celebrating Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, as the “Provincetown of the Middle East,” where “gay men and women from other Arab countries and the West are increasingly vacationing.” The journalist, Patrick Healy, described the choice of vacationing in Beirut as “all the more sexy and thrilling for some because they feel they are living on the edge and discovering a gay culture that is freshly evolving” (Healy 2009). Such descriptions of Beirut do not circulate in a vacuum. Lebanon, a sectarian, Muslim-majority country, has often been regarded as exceptional in the Arab world for its seeming diversity
and cosmopolitanism. Following the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri in 2005 and the Syrian troops’ withdrawal from Lebanon later that year, contemporary Euro-American presses hailed Beirut as a new gay-friendly tourist destination in the Middle East. Euro-American presses describe gay life using linear narratives of progress, gauging improvements in the rise of “tolerant” attitudes and the growth of Western-style gay identities, gay-friendly spaces, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations. These representations use neoliberal logics to produce a Beirut where both people and places are made intelligible, commodified, and ready for consumption. Thus, they sell Beirut as a city that is welcoming and accommodating to Western gay tourists to the extent that they describe it as “the chameleon city, catering to any desire,” where anything one wants can be found in abundance (Masri 2009).

I came across Healy’s article in August 2009, a few weeks after arriving in the United States to pursue my Ph.D. I not only did not know what or where Provincetown was—the famous LGBT vacation destination in Cape Cod, Massachusetts—but also could not relate to the experiences that Healy narrates. Reading Healy’s account of Beirut’s gay friendliness made me question the extent to which I and my friends in Beirut had experienced the city as gay friendly. My research found a growing trend of Euro-American articles and gay travelogues encouraging gay men from Western Europe and North America to visit Beirut. Such descriptions simultaneously liken life in Beirut to and distance it from that in Euro-American cities, while often reminding readers that Beirut is still in the Middle East. These articles make similar distinctions between parts of Beirut that are progressive and gay friendly (like the West) and those that are not (similar to other parts of the Arab world). Once hailed as the “Paris of the Middle East,” Beirut has seemingly recovered from Lebanon’s fifteen-year civil war (1975–1990) and now presents an exciting, different, and relatively safer yet somewhat dangerous option for travelers in the Middle East. Gay tourism to Beirut, however, is a newly emerging phenomenon. The articles I found were clearly directed to a white Euro-American audience of gay men, and they left me puzzled: Who has these experiences of gay Beirut, and who gets to speak of gay life in Beirut?

This book challenges both popular and academic representations of contemporary Beirut as exceptional, while highlighting everyday-life disruptions in Beirut. I argue that these representations rely on discourses of sexuality (especially LGBT identity) that construct Beirut as “modern” in relation to other sites in the Middle East (and other parts of Lebanon). In addition, they use a market-driven, neoliberal framework that constructs Beirut as the
object of both consumer desire (tourism) and foreign investment. The Orientalist logics of these representations occur on multiple levels, which, in contemporary culture, take the form of what I call “fractal Orientalism.” As an alternative to these exceptionalist representations of Beirut, the book focuses on Beirut as it is lived by my LGBT interlocutors, who are primarily women and genderqueer persons. Rather than analyze LGBT identity formation per se, the book analyzes practices, particularly what I call queer strategies of everyday life, that my interlocutors use to navigate ongoing daily disruptions in Beirut. In doing so, the book highlights the centrality of everyday-life disruptions as a defining feature of life in contemporary Beirut—a condition that confounds existing Foucauldian models of power that rely on distinctions between normative and nonnormative positionings (or situations). Thus, the book exposes the inherent “stability” that is assumed in these conceptions of queer theory and offers an alternative theoretical lens that instead highlights disruptions and precarity as normative conditions of everyday life. My use of “queer” follows queer theorist Siobhan Somerville’s (2014) conceptualization of “queer” as a verb, an action, and a relation. I use the term “queer” both in relation to nonnormative gender and sexuality and in reference to the larger social condition of everyday disruptions. That is, a queer situation refers to an anomalous condition in relation to what we perceive as normative (for example, imminent disruptions versus stability).

Tourism and Disruptions in Beirut

Despite decades of violent conflict and political instability, Lebanon has maintained its tourism and service industry on which its economy is highly dependent. The government promotes tourism by highlighting Lebanon and Beirut’s exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism (see Lebanon Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). While most of the tourists are Lebanese expatriates who live abroad, there has been a growing informal gay tourism industry, which, even though not endorsed by the state, is run by Lebanese tourism groups such as Lebtour and the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) (discussed in more detail in Chapter 1).

Depictions of Beirut’s openness and cosmopolitanism cite Lebanon’s religious and sectarian diversity and “nascent” gay life as signs of exceptionalism and modernity in the Middle East. Hariri’s assassination in 2005 and the resulting Syrian troop withdrawal from Lebanon were regarded as a turning point in recent Lebanese history, especially with regard to possibilities for a new democracy and political reform. However, in the months and years
after 2005, the beliefs and promises of a new beginning and the possibilities for the expansion of civil liberties were countered by the stark reality of more state-led oppression targeting already-marginalized groups in Lebanon (Makarem 2011, 106).

As sociologist Rima Majed (2016) illustrates, the Syrian troops’ withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 inaugurated a new phase in Lebanese postwar history. Majed notes that social movements and political alliances shifted away from primarily Pan-Arab and pro-Palestinian mobilizations to a focus on internal politics and heightened calls for civil liberties. Violence and daily disruptions took on various manifestations in the years that followed. The period between 2005 and 2008 witnessed a series of targeted assassinations against prominent journalists and politicians who were critical of the Syrian regime; a number of explosions in various neighborhoods in Beirut; a thirty-three-day Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006; a war between the Lebanese Armed Forces and a radical Islamist Sunni group in the Nahr El Bared Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon in 2007; and an internal violent conflict in May 2008 in Beirut between supporters of Hezbollah and supporters of the government and the Future Movement, a political party led by Hariri’s son. Political deadlocks became endemic in the post-2005 phase of Lebanon’s history. There were two periods of political standstill when Lebanon had no president, from November 2007 to May 2008 and from May 2014 to October 2016.

As the Arab uprisings began to spread, their effects were felt in most countries in the region, even those—such as Lebanon—that did not witness a revolutionary wave. In the summer of 2012, the Syrian uprising started to shift into a full-blown war. The escalation in Syria spilled over to Lebanon, manifesting itself as armed clashes between Sunni Muslim groups who opposed the Syrian regime and mainly Muslim Alawite groups who supported the regime in the northern city of Tripoli and the southern city of Sidon. By that time, the polarization around the Special Tribunal for Lebanon concerning Hariri’s assassination had also intensified. The year 2012 witnessed a number of assassinations targeting general security officers. As the conflict in Syria developed and with Hezbollah’s direct involvement in the war in Syria, the internal security situation in Lebanon deteriorated. In 2013, Beirut also became a target of numerous Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) suicide bombings and attacks. From 2013 to 2015, there were fourteen ISIL car bombings and suicide attacks, mostly aimed at civilians and checkpoints in the predominantly working- to middle-class Shia southern suburbs of Beirut. This culminated in November 2015 when an ISIL suicide bombing in the predominantly working-class Shia Burj al-Barajneh neighborhood in the
southern suburbs led to the death of eighty-nine people and wounded more than two hundred (see discussion in the Conclusion).

Al-Wad’: Defining a Queer Situation

Life in Beirut remained highly precarious. Suicide bombings targeted civilians and army checkpoints, and there were shortages of basic services (such as daily electricity blackouts and the lack of clean drinking water). A citywide garbage crisis began in 2015, which has not officially been resolved, “when a huge landfill site closed and government authorities failed to implement a contingency plan in time to replace it; dumping and burning waste on the streets became widespread. The campaign group Human Rights Watch calls it ‘a national health crisis’” (Smith Galer 2018).

For as long as I can remember, people in Beirut have used the term al-wad’ to capture the complexity of everyday violence, disruptions, and lack of basic services. Al-wad’ is the Arabic equivalent of the term “the situation,” which can also refer to “circumstance(s); condition(s); position; setting; . . . state (of affairs or things as they are)” or “status.” “The situation,” then, is a general and nebulous term, commonly used in post–civil war Lebanon to refer to the shifting conditions of instability in the country that constantly shape everyday life. It simply refers to the ways that things are, the normative ordering of things and events. However, it produces feelings of constant unease, anticipation of the unknown or what the future might bring, and daily anxieties. Perhaps this feeling is best captured by my conversation with a cab driver in May 2019, when the driver describes the feelings of anxiety and fear of the unknown that al-wad’ produces as living “in a state of everyday war.”

It is not uncommon for people to use unclear terms when speaking about conflicts, which serve as vague containers for histories (and ongoing situations) of trauma, violence, and struggles. For example, people in Lebanon distinguish between “the events” (al-ahdath) in reference to the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990) and “the situation” (al-wad’). In a place where there is no shared narrative or history of the civil war or postwar reconciliation among people, these vague terms help keep a form of peace. Though one might wish to analogize al-wad’ to “the Troubles” in Northern Ireland or “the Conflict” between Israel and Palestine, it does not carry the same connotation or even affective resonance, since the term “situation,” unlike “trouble” or “conflict,” does not necessarily convey something negative. Al-ahdath, which is similar to al-wad’, is a disaffected and nebulous term, yet it signifies more than just “the everyday situation.” However, al-ahdath, the Conflict, and the Troubles all refer to conflicts and histories of partition that are racialized.
Having such a seemingly neutral and nebulous term to describe circumstances of a place and people reflects the difficulty of finding words that can capture or express what the situation actually is. “The situation” is a term that in English might refer to a particular situation and might not carry much weight; in the Lebanese context, however, *al-wad’* is a loaded term. In Beirut, people share their anxieties and experiences of *al-wad’* as imminent disruptions and refer to it in conversations with one another without having to explain. The term establishes a shared sense of knowledge and feeling among people in Lebanon. A person who needs to have the term explained is marked as an outsider to *al-wad’*. Because there is no clear beginning or end to *al-wad’*—it is constantly changing—what remains is its disruptive and affective elements. Perhaps the power of *al-wad’* is its generality and untranslatability to those who do not experience it as a daily, precarious, and normative state. What happens when the way that things are or the normative baseline implies constant yet shifting disruptions? My interlocutors use the term *al-wad’* to name a condition but also to reveal the kinds of queer tactics or strategies that become necessary under such disruptive conditions. These queer tactics also gesture toward an expansive understanding of queerness—one that does not necessarily link to LGBT identities but to practices of negotiating everyday life.

This book uses the concept of *al-wad’* in two ways: (1) to describe the historical context and the backdrop of the research and to capture the challenges and precarity that shape everyday life and (2) to serve as a metaphor and analytical tool to help understand queer strategies of everyday life in Beirut. The queer strategies enacted by my interlocutors also disrupt dominant discourses of Beirut’s exceptionalism and gay life in Beirut. My use of the term “disruptive situations” might betray the concept of *al-wad’*, since it assumes that there are moments or times when life is not disrupted. *Al-wad’* is the situation that is always disruptive. It serves as a description as well as a metaphor for the challenges and precarity as a result of war and strife that shape quotidian life; it occurs when the out of the ordinary becomes the normal. In other words, *al-wad’* is a way of describing queer times. Though language ultimately fails in articulating or accounting for what *al-wad’* actually is, affect does not.

**Exceptionalism as “Fractal Orientalism”**

Despite the disruptive effects of *al-wad’*, in 2013, when violence from the Syrian war had already spilled over to Lebanon and Beirut, the U.S.-based urban policy magazine *City Journal* published an article by American jour-
nalist Michael Totten titled “Can Beirut Become Paris Again? Freed from Syrian Domination, Lebanon’s Capital Could Shine.” In the article, Totten (2013) considers how the war and devastation in Syria had the unintended effect of making Beirut “potentially shine” again: “Today, the shoe is on the other foot. Syria, not Lebanon, is suffering the horrors of civil war. With Syria’s Bashar al-Assad possibly on his way out—or at least too busy to export mayhem to his neighbors—will Beirut have the chance to regain its lost glory?” Taking into account the everyday violence and disruptions of al-wad’, how might we make sense of the numerous representations of Beirut being circulated in Euro-American publications, including Healy’s (2009) celebration of gay tourism in Beirut and Totten’s (2013) hopeful vision for Beirut to return to its “former glory”? While Beirut of the 1970s and 1980s (and sometimes 1990s) continues to be represented as dangerous and war-torn in the U.S. imagination, as depicted, for example, in the 2018 Hollywood movie Beirut (filmed in Morocco), contemporary Beirut is also hailed as the “Provincetown of the Middle East.” These Orientalist depictions, though seeming to be at odds, complement each other. Current fighting, tensions, and violence in Beirut become described as a natural state of the Middle East and are not easily understood or explained as war. At first glance, these representations appear to be “traditional” Orientalism, or what Edward Said (1978) describes as historical discursive misrepresentations of the Middle East that tend to paint it as homogeneous and backward, in opposition to the progressive and diverse West. Orientalism relies on irreconcilable binaries and differences between the West and the Middle East to explain the region, cities, and peoples of the Middle East. However, on closer examination, I suggest that these contemporary neoliberal representations of Beirut use and rely on fractal Orientalism, or Orientalisms within the Middle East.

Fractals, or “nested dichotomies” (Abbott 2001, 9), are geometric patterns that repeat themselves infinitely across multiple scales and contexts. These geometric patterns are found in nature, such as in plants, leaves, and snowflakes, where exactly the same shape is simultaneously reproduced on multiple levels that keep repeating themselves (Peitgen and Richter 1986). Fractals usually hide in plain sight, such as in nature, and therefore are often hard to identify. Unlike Orientalism, which does not account for the multiple scales by which binaries are produced and circulated, fractal Orientalism shows how the same binaries simultaneously operate on global, regional, and local scales. While I draw on the effects of fractal Orientalism in the example of Beirut, it is useful for other sites that are shaped by similar histories and relations of power. As a theoretical lens, it is an imperial structure or imposition that functions concurrently at the transnational, regional, national, and
city levels; hence, it provides us with a multiscalar spatial model that uncovers how distinctions are made, circulated, and remade.

Since fractal Orientalism simultaneously operates on multiple scales and a fractal takes the same shape as the whole, we can choose to focus on one level or scale of the fractal and still get a narrative that seems complete. Fractal Orientalism uses relational distinctions to produce Lebanon as exceptional and gay friendly—that is, “modern,” but only within the context of the Arab Middle East. In addition, the supposed gay friendliness attributed to Beirut obscures ongoing conditions of instability in Beirut and Lebanon. Rather than take for granted that Orientalism produces a single binary of East-West, this book zooms in and out to capture the multiple layers by which fractal Orientalism works.

_Disruptive Situations_ seeks to uncover the underlying processes of fractal Orientalism that make it possible to think of Beirut as exceptional and to unpack how queerness gets produced: what is considered “queer” and who are considered as “legitimate” LGBT subjects. The process and act of situating Beirut and Beirutis as exceptional in relation to various “others” make it possible to recount multiple stories and experiences of Beirut. Naming Beirut the Paris (or Provincetown) of the Middle East is an act of situating Beirut in relation to both Middle Eastern and Euro-American cities. Beirut is likened to Paris yet distanced from it, because Beirut is in the Middle East. These narratives suggest that Beirut has some qualities of the presumably progressive Paris, yet it is not entirely Paris since it also shares qualities with other (not-so-progressive) cities in the Middle East.

Fractal Orientalism illustrates how transnational discourses of national and sexual exceptionalism operate on multiple scales. They are multifaceted and circulate at global (not just in the West), regional, and local levels; they are informed by and in touch with one another. Thus, the binaries of traditional versus modern and backward versus progressive are used to distinguish the Middle East from Europe, Lebanon from other countries in the Arab Middle East, and Beirut from other cities in Lebanon. Fractal Orientalism makes it possible to distinguish Lebanese gays from others in the Arab World and the West.

This book challenges how sexuality has been used to provide an exceptional narrative about contemporary Beirut and modernity. It offers an alternative to the fractal Orientalist narratives of Beiruti and Lebanese exceptionalism and instead uses the queer materialities of _al-wad’_ to understand LGBT people’s queer strategies of everyday life in Beirut. While fractals are useful for thinking about the multiscalar production of binaries and discursive misrepresentations of Beirut and Lebanon, they have their limitations
in fully accounting for how differences are negotiated, felt, and experienced. *Al-wad’*, however, is not about representations; rather, it is used to invoke a felt experience of what the situation actually does: its material consequences and effects. Rather than an empirical description of *al-wad’*, I offer LGBT people’s experiences of *al-wad’* as an alternative framework to fractal Orientalism. I investigate LGBT people’s “queer strategies” in navigating anxieties, violence, and disruptions of everyday life, with a focus on queer subjectivities and access to space.

My goal is to intervene in Orientalist representations of gender and sexuality in the Arab world. Current representations (including scholarly work) on gender and sexuality in the Middle East rely on binaries and a flattened understanding of culture as a site of difference. This book builds on theoretical work that analyzes and critiques linear narratives of progress and modernity that are grounded in gay neoliberal ideals of coming out and visibility (Massad 2007; Puar 2007; Reddy 2011). However, it departs from such works by privileging the affective dimensions of such discourses and the ways that LGBT individuals articulate and negotiate them in their everyday lives. What does it mean to think of Beirut as exceptional? Where does *al-wad’* fare in such representations? How do various groups of individuals experience *al-wad’*? How can learning about LGBT people’s everyday-life strategies help us better understand both *al-wad’* and the shifting precarious conditions of daily life? Such questions animate this book.

*(Un)Exceptional Disruptions and the Study of LGBT Lives*

*Disruptive Situations* offers a methodological intervention in the study of queer lives by mobilizing the voices of LGBT people in understanding larger questions about war, violence, and precarity. It draws our attention to how disruptions and violence become familiar and calls into question what constitutes “ordinary” and “mundane” aspects of queer lives. Moving away from perspectives that view disruptions as a reflection of exceptionalism or triumphalism, the book highlights queer tactics or strategies of everyday life. Queer tactics or strategies are not just a theorization. They are enactments of political strategies that are not always calculated but essential in navigating the difficulties of daily life: for example, how LGBT individuals access space, move throughout the city, cross checkpoints, and connect with others. Though the book focuses on practices that LGBT people enact, queer strategies of navigating *al-wad’* are not necessarily enacted only by LGBT people. They are also quotidian political practices enacted against oppressive regimes that name and control certain individuals as nonnormative.
Focusing on local manifestations of everyday-life precarity and disruptions in Beirut, I ask: How do queer strategies of everyday life better help us understand “the situation” and the precarious? Unlike an event (such as a natural disaster, a state of emergency, or war), al-wad’ does not have a clear beginning or process of unfolding. Rather than try to make sense of its different manifestations or my interlocutors’ understanding of “the situation,” my focus on queer strategies helps me get at how “the situation” gets lived and negotiated. Based on ethnographic research, “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998), and life interviews with LGBT individuals in Beirut in the periods 2008–2009 and 2013–2014, Disruptive Situations intervenes in, and disrupts, portrayals of Arab LGBT persons as homogeneous minorities. Unlike current ethnographic and interview-based research, it does not study gay Beirut or seek to document gay life in the city. It is less concerned with questions of whether gay life exists in Beirut, what forms it takes or how it looks, or what gay subjects do; rather, my objects of study are the queer tactics enacted by my interlocutors rather than the people themselves. I move away from analyses that conceptualize LGBT people as a discernible category or minority and assume that queer subjects in the Arab world are always in the process of resisting or adopting Western conceptions of LGBT identities. My interlocutors do not situate their lives along the lines of this rejection-adoptive dichotomy. They do not simply adopt LGBT identities; nor do they really attempt to fit their lives within the dominant Euro-American LGBT framework. The majority understand their sexual subjectivities to be intertwined with their class, gender, and religious sect. Rather than document or look for the possibilities of LGBT life, I ask what everyday-life queer tactics can tell us about local and regional politics. By asking what everyday queer tactics have to say about queer life in contexts where precarity and disruptions are the conditions of everyday social and culture life, I raise questions that apply to spaces beyond Beirut.

One of the unintended consequences of working in and on a place such as contemporary Beirut is the necessity of grappling with the question of how we understand a social phenomenon like gender or sexual nonnormativity in a place that is so shaped by political turmoil and multiple disruptions. Traditionally, literature on nonnormative gender and sexualities in the Arab Middle East focuses on marginality of LGBT and queer communities (Whitaker 2006; El-Feki 2013). However, another growing body of research looks at the multiple positions that LGBT individuals occupy, beyond their nonnormative gender and sexualities (Ritchie 2010; Makarem 2011; Naber and Zaatari 2014; Merabet 2014). For example, anthropologist Nadine Naber and feminist researcher Zeina Zaatari (2014) examine the antiwar activism of
LGBT and feminist organizations in Beirut, focusing on their humanitarian and relief work during the Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006 rather than only on their LGBT activism. Naber and Zaatari document the effects of the transnational war on terror by shifting the lens “away from the center of power (the empire) to the everyday lives of feminist and queer activists living the war on terror from the ground up” (2014, 92). I build on Naber and Zaatari’s work by emphasizing what queer strategies of everyday life can tell us about larger everyday-life disruptions and violence, which are emblematic of what’s happening at the geopolitical level. While Naber and Zaatari focus on a state of emergency during the Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006 as an example and extension of the war on terror, I look at disruptions that are not easily captured by a particular moment or incident. These everyday-life disruptions are not seen as states of emergency but as normative aspects of daily life in Beirut. I consider how gender, class, and normativity simultaneously shape LGBT individuals’ queer tactics of everyday life and their engagements with discourses of cosmopolitanism and national exceptionalism in Beirut.

Anthropologist Sofian Merabet’s (2014) *Queer Beirut* also pays careful attention to the constitutive role of sect and class in understanding sexual subjectivities in Beirut. In his ethnography of “queer Beirut,” Merabet does an excellent job of capturing the experiences of inhabiting and moving through the streets of Beirut (and beyond), taking us on a journey through a number of neighborhoods and the ways that spaces have become coded as “gay friendly” by gay men. His focus on sexual difference, rights, and normalized homophobia sheds light on space making and identity acquisition. *Disruptive Situations*, however, explores a different kind of ethnography. While Merabet raises questions about sexual subjectivities, he does so by attending to the everyday performative and bodily practices of men and the construction of urban gay or what he refers to as “queer spaces”—and the changing landscapes of gay spaces in Beirut. Using queer methods, this book focuses on queer strategies of everyday life rather than an approach that minoritizes LGBT people, and it sheds light on larger questions of disruption, coloniality, and power. It destabilizes the seemingly coherent narrative of queer exceptionalism in Beirut by attending to everyday-life disruptions and the transnational flow of discourses of modernity, progress, and cosmopolitanism. Unlike *Queer Beirut*’s focus on Lebanese men and gay Beirut, this book does not privilege Lebanese gay cisgender men; rather, it centers women and genderqueer persons.

*Disruptive Situations* extends emerging scholarship on transnational queer studies, urban studies, and social-scientific and interdisciplinary research that employs queer methods and political economies of sexuality in understanding
social life, including but not limited to sexuality (Allen 2011; Benedicto 2014; Cantú 2009; El-Tayeb 2011; Haritaworn 2015; Perez 2015; Puri 2016). In addition, it complicates transnational queer and sexuality studies and queer theory. I am indebted to queer of color critique (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004; Muñoz 1999; Reddy 2011) for centering whiteness in our understanding of queer theory and for illustrating the ways that queer theory is “an explicitly racialized project” (Vidal-Ortiz 2019, 75). Queer of color critique also centering sexual-identity categories and instead focuses on people’s relation to state power. However, by doing so, it unwittingly takes the nation-state as a category of analysis for granted. Because of the theory’s near-exclusive focus on U.S. racial formations and its overreliance on the state, it falls short in accounting for the transnational. Transnational and geopolitical structures and lenses are necessary for understanding local formations. Thus, building on queer of color critique, I focus on what queer strategies of everyday life tell us about geopolitical and transnational formations in Beirut.

While the field of queer studies destabilizes identities and interrogates modes of knowing about the social world, its reliance on categories of normativity has been understated. That is, queer theory presumes a normative standard that needs to be “shaken” or “upset.” The notion of al-wad’, however, illustrates the impossibility of establishing that distinction (normative-nonnormative) in any consistent or continuous way over time and space. Therefore, I ask what becomes of queer life when conditions of everyday life upset the tethering of a normative baseline that queer theory presumes exists. In other words, what analyses can queer studies offer when everyday-life disruptions and precarity are the conditions of social and cultural life? By regarding normativity as a contested category, I shed light on the tensions between queer modes of life and an already-disruptive or queer situation.

Queering Lebanese Exceptionalism

Discourses on Lebanon’s exceptional status in the Middle East have their roots in the colonial French Mandate that founded Lebanon as a country primarily for the protection of Christians and other religious minorities in the Arab Middle East. Prior to the 1975–1990 civil war, Beirut was often described as the Middle Eastern equivalent of Paris and also as the “Switzerland of the Middle East,” particularly for its banking industry, nightlife, and flourishing art scene. Contemporary discourses on Beiruti exceptionalism emerge from the neoliberal policies of the Rafic Hariri governments of the 1990s, which employed discourses on openness and progress to attract foreign investments—particularly from the Arab Gulf—to rebuild the country
after the fifteen-year civil war. However, narratives concerning progress are narratives about capital, neoliberalism, and consumption. Prior to the civil war, downtown Beirut had been a major hub for all Lebanese, but during reconstruction, Hariri’s governments and the company Solidere transformed it into a high-end shopping district, an exclusive space primarily for the consumption of high-end goods and food catering mostly to tourists from the Gulf (Masri 2010).

Since 2005, with the increase in assassinations of anti-Syrian politicians, journalists, and activists, and later ISIL suicide bombings in Lebanon, tourism advertisements focused mostly on rebranding the safety of Lebanon. The Lebanese Ministry of Tourism’s advertisements cater predominantly to Lebanese diaspora and tourists from the Arab Gulf. While not being able to deny al-wad’, these advertisements redefine safety, suggesting that to be safe is to be in a familiar (and familial) setting and to be reunited with family and friends. For example, a 2007 advertisement titled “Lebanon the Safest Country on Earth” explicitly stated that “there is no safer place than in the arms of your loved ones.” In 2013, in another ad, titled “Don’t Go to Lebanon,” the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism cast as narrator the famous Lebanese singer Assi Helani, who recited a number of practices that people in general are cautioned not to do:

They say don’t stay in the sun too long, but is there anything more beautiful than the sun? They say too much food is bad for you, but is there something better than food? They say don’t stay out too long, but is there something more fun than partying? They say stay away from arguments, but is there anything more beautiful than democracy? They say stay away from Lebanon, but is there something more beautiful than Lebanon?

This advertisement acknowledges the risks of visiting Lebanon, especially those issued by Euro-American governments and Arab Gulf states; however, at the same time, it reshapes the discourse by inviting Lebanese expatriates to visit, using the notion that breaking the rules is an exciting adventure.

In addition to the state and local tourism organizations, fractal Orientalist discourses on Lebanese and Beiruti exceptionalism have and continue to globally circulate in Euro-American media and press. For example, journalist Michael Totten simultaneously employs fractal Orientalist distinctions at the global, regional, and local scales to account for life in Beirut and Lebanon. At the global and regional levels Totten (2013) makes the following distinction:
Beirut is nevertheless by far the most cosmopolitan, liberal, and even Western of Arab cities. To an extent, you can chalk that up to the cultural influence of Lebanese Christians and imperial France. But the Sunni half of town is no less culturally developed than the Christian. Art galleries, fantastic bookstores, film and music festivals, and even gay bars—unthinkable in Baghdad or Cairo—proliferate in both parts of the city.

Totten (2013) claims that Beirut, although not Paris, is the “most cosmopolitan, liberal, and even Western of Arab cities.” This fractal Orientalist positioning makes it possible for Totten to situate Beirut as more Western in relation to its Arab counterparts yet not Western enough in relation to its Euro-American counterparts. He cites French and Lebanese Christians’ influences as a distinguishing factor in Beirut. However, he is surprised that Sunnis are “no less culturally developed” than their Christian counterparts, pointing out that they too have galleries, bookstores, festivals, and even gay bars. In doing so, Totten gauges culture and progressiveness of a place and people by looking for the presence of Western conceptions of art and culture. However, for Totten to establish Beirutis’ exceptionalism in the Arab world, his use of fractal Orientalism makes it necessary to contrast it to Cairo and Baghdad, where such cultural events remain “unthinkable.”

Totten not only makes distinctions between Beirut and other cities in the Arab world but also distinguishes locally between the Lebanese themselves. He celebrates imperialism and French colonialism, citing it as the cause for Lebanon’s and Lebanese Christians’ exceptionalism.13

The Christian half of the city sustained less damage during the [civil] war than the Sunni half did, and it is consequently the more French-looking of the two today. Its culture is also more French, since many Lebanese Christians feel a political, cultural, and religious kinship with France and the French language that Lebanese Muslims do not. The western side of the city is more culturally Arab and also, since so many of its buildings were flattened during the war, architecturally bland. Though the Sunnis there are more liberal and cosmopolitan than most Sunni Arabs elsewhere, their culture, religion, language, and loyalties are, for the most part, in sync with those of their more conservative Middle Eastern neighbors. (Totten 2013)

To highlight Beirut’s exceptionalism and cosmopolitanism, Totten looks for signs of “Frenchness” in the city, which he finds in the Christian rather
than the Muslim areas. Lebanese Christians become hailed as the bearers of Beirut’s cosmopolitanism, whereas Muslims—Sunnis in particular—are depicted as more traditional since they have affinities with their counterparts, their “conservative Middle Eastern neighbors.” Totten continues by contrasting the majority Shia southern suburbs of Beirut, or al-Dahiyeh, to Christian areas in Beirut:

The *dahiyeh* looks and feels like a ramshackle Iranian satellite, even though you can walk there from central Beirut in an hour. Once known as the “belt of misery,” the area is still a slum. Most of the buildings are 12-story apartment towers built without permits or attention to aesthetics of any kind—especially the French kind. There are places in East Beirut where, if you try hard enough and squint, you could fool yourself into believing that you’re in France. You could never get away with that in the *dahiyeh*. (Totten 2013)

Totten continues to use the adoption of French aesthetics as a barometer or a sign of the progressiveness of Beirut. Any resemblance to France becomes the example of whether a place can be considered cosmopolitan. Presumably Totten is not talking about the Parisian suburbs (*banlieues*), where North African French and Muslims live, but other parts of France that he considers cosmopolitan. At the same time, resemblance to an imagined Iran, which he links to the Shia southern suburbs, suggests a space that is backward and lacks culture. His use of fractal Orientalism is even more pronounced when distinguishing between the Lebanese themselves: Christians (being more progressive and “cultured”) versus Muslims (and Shias in particular, who have “no bearing to culture”; Totten 2013). Totten’s article demonstrates how Western representations create the fractal Orientalist comparisons, but these discourses are also taken up and circulated in Beirut by the Lebanese themselves.

Lebanese development, reconstruction, and urban-planning companies such as Solidere heavily rely on such discourses to advertise (and sell) Beirut. For example, they cite Euro-American newswires and journalistic accounts of Lebanon to promote Beirut. On a research trip to Beirut in the summer of 2010, I came across advertisements for a high-end shopping and restaurant promenade that reproduced selections from Euro-American magazine articles that highlighted the fact that Beirut is regaining its place as a top tourism destination (see Figures I.1, I.2, and I.3). The circulation of statements such as “Beirut is back on the map” and “the revival of a landmark,” by Western news outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, Agence
Figure I.1. “The World Is Beiruting Again,” 2010. (Photograph by the author.)

Figure I.2. “Beirut Is Back on the Map,” 2010. (Photograph by the author.)
France-Presse, the *Financial Times*, and the *New York Times*, illustrates that Beirut is lucrative for foreign investors and as a new tourist destination. Most notable is the advertisement taken from Agence France-Presse, which states: “The World is Beiruting Again: Brimming with Style, Beirut Is Regaining Its Reputation as a Shopper’s Paradise.” What does it mean for the world to be “Beiruting” again? Given these advertisements, “Beiruting” as a verb signifies an act of consumption and commodification. More specifically, Beiruting becomes equated to style and luxury shopping. Here, the political economy of progress becomes directly related to particular neoliberal patterns of consumption and the selling of places.

One of the main questions this book asks is: Who has access to and gets to engage in the consumptive practices of Beiruting? While the world is seemingly Beiruting again, there is no consensus about whether Beirut has become or has “regained its title as Paris of the Middle East” (Sherwood and Williams 2009) or whether Beirut can be Paris again (Totten 2013). To queer the term “Beiruting,” I use it as a verb and ask: How do my interlocutors and I “Beirut”? The idea of Beiruting, and what it means to Beirut, pairs with another major question: Who experiences Beirut as gay friendly?

**Modern “Gays”**

Transnational discourses about modernity and progress, currently animated by the specter of a unitary Islam, often use sex and sexuality to determine a
society’s progressiveness (Bracke 2012). Sexual politics, as queer theorist Judith Butler argues, often link modernity “to sexual freedom, and the sexual freedom of gay people in particular is understood to exemplify a culturally advanced position, as opposed to one that would be deemed pre-modern” (2010, 105). In other words, the realm of “sexual freedom” determines how people and places are positioned and assessed in relation to one another in transnational narratives of modernity and progress (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002; Reddy 2011). These transnational discourses of progress employ mainstream gay visibility as markers of freedom of expression and signs of national/cultural progress (Manalansan 1995). Similar to sociologist Lionel Cantú (2009), I am less interested in tracing where these discourses come from and whether LGBT identifications are imported or not (Vidal-Ortiz 2019). Rather, the focus here is on how discourses of sexual progress and modernity are circulated and articulated in Beirut. More specifically, I pay attention to the political economy of these discourses by centralizing the role of power in how they travel and how they make certain designations of people and places possible. For example, while discourses of progress designate certain neighborhoods in Beirut to be more “modern,” people, too, take up these discourses in various ways, whether to discount, reproduce, or redefine themselves and others. Ultimately, as Chapter 2 describes, narratives of progress are not unidirectional but take on multiple manifestations. I acknowledge the slippages between categories of cosmopolitan, secular, exceptionalism, and modernity. Instead of trying to parse out and use these concepts neatly, they are used as brought up in the field, particularly to show their grit, messiness, and entanglements.15 For example, while I used terms such as “openness” and “inclusive,” my interlocutors used designations such as “gay friendly” and “cosmopolitan.”

Among the challenges faced while conducting fieldwork in Beirut was explaining to my friends and acquaintances the topic of my research. Many assumed that working on queer subjectivities in Beirut meant working on identity acquisition and LGBT communities, or “gay life” in Beirut. I did not initially frame queer experiences only in terms of LGBT individuals’ lives and had intended to include individuals whose sexual lives and experiences are not considered normative in Lebanon and do not benefit from heterosexual privilege, such as asexual individuals and single mothers. However, even by focusing on LGBT people’s narratives and strategies, I am able to touch on multiple experiences that are beyond sexuality. In explaining my research, the term “queer” is used as a shorthand for and interchangeably with LGBT people. In a May 2013 fieldwork trip to Beirut, an acquaintance, Sura, asked me about my research. I explained that it is about queer subjectivities. She
directly responded by saying, “Oh, there aren’t a lot of people identifying as queer anymore here. They used to, but now, since there is more openness, people don’t need to identify as queer. They can just say, ‘I am gay.’” Queer as identification, according to her, gave people the possibility to live in and inhabit multiple worlds. In addition, it could also be used as a “cover” for lesbian or gay. What is striking about her claim is the assumption that with time and more acceptance, nonheterosexual individuals are more likely to identify as gay instead of queer. Hence, she conceives of queerness and gayness teleologically: One precedes the other, and each identification is based on and derived from the political situation and the safety of the actors. Two points are worth noting: First, for Sura, queer is used to blur “gayness” and hence acts as a safer identification that people would abandon over time when they feel safer. Second, Sura does not make distinctions regarding what forms of gay visibilities might be safer and for whom and how the form might differ based on gender, class, and context. To think about who is accepted is to always have to think about gender, class, race, and religious sect and how they inform one’s position and one’s possibility of being accepted for being queer. Framing societal acceptance of LGBT people as an undifferentiated group, as Sura does, glosses over the multiple exclusions and inequalities that constitute and are constitutive of nonnormative and LGBT formations and spaces in Beirut.

Others who asked about my research often followed up by bringing up the issue of gay marriage in Europe and the United States, pointing out that “we” in Lebanon are still stuck in the past, despite it being 2013–2014. Such explanations employ linear narratives of progress that perceive gay marriage as the pinnacle of gay and lesbian acceptance. In addition, they locate neoliberal concepts and understandings of rights, acceptance, and diversity, often coded as “modern,” in Western Europe and North America and point out that “we” have yet to catch up. Such examples suggest that tolerance and a celebration of gender diversity, sexual diversity, and visibility signify the cultural advancement of Lebanese society. While Lebanon is imagined as more modern than other Arab countries in this fractal Orientalist comparison, it still lags behind its Euro-American counterparts.