

Ultimately, *The Right Kind of Suffering* privileges the detailed, experiential narratives of asylum seekers that are often missing from top-down analyses of asylum systems. Its compelling style and readability make it an ideal introductory text for undergraduate students and community members who are interested in learning about the American asylum system and the challenges faced by asylees before and after their refuge is granted.

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## Disruptive Situations: Fractal Orientalism and Queer Strategies in Beirut

**Ghassan Moussawi (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020). Pp. 198. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781439918500**

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Ghassan Moussawi's *Disruptive Situations* is a provocative book that unsettles disciplinary boundaries, centers the lived experiences of LGBT individuals, and de-exceptionalizes queer strategies of survival used to navigate everyday life disruptions in the context of post-civil war Beirut. Although the book is based on research among LGBT individuals in Beirut, it refuses to partake in the dominant heteronormative academic distribution of labor that dictates that research among queer individuals and communities can only yield knowledge about queerness, gender, and sexuality (although these are of course important issues that the book richly and thoughtfully explores). Instead, Moussawi uses his careful research to provide a sense of the quotidian precarities and strategies of survival necessitated by life in post-war Beirut—a situation characterized by frequent shortages of basic services, endemic violence, political turmoil, and what one of his interlocutors describes as living “in a state of everyday war” (p. 5). He uses the intentionally nebulous and hard to translate Arabic term *al-waḍʿ* (the way that things are) to describe “the state of constantly living in uncertainty” and to capture its shared and ongoing rather than exceptional nature (p. 23). In describing the strategies used by his interlocutors to navigate this situation as queer tactics, he not only shows the relevance of queer theory to thinking about experiences such as life in the aftermath of war, the ravages of neoliberalism, and endemic trauma, he also parochializes the assumption that queerness is primarily that which disrupts the putative stability of gendered and sexual norms. By asking that we take seriously queer modalities of agency that operate in contexts in which daily disruptions and instability are the norm, he moves beyond a normative/non-normative binary and shows what can be gained from theorizing queerness outside the West and from locations characterized by endemic precarity. He also enacts (and therefore invites) a more intersectional understanding of queerness that attends to the mediating effects of class, race, gender, religion, etc., and foregrounds the role of geopolitics, political economy, and the coloniality of transnational discourses about gender and sexuality in his analysis.

Using a transnational feminist and queer studies approach, the book speaks back in powerful ways to a dominant Western discourse that praises Beirut for being “gay friendly” and the Paris (or Provincetown) of the Middle East. In doing so, he asks “for whom is Beirut cosmopolitan and gay friendly” and what does this discourse serve to elide and deflect attention from? (p. 57). His book is as much preoccupied with taking his LGBT Beirut interlocutors



seriously on their own terms by privileging their concerns and preoccupations while living through *al-waḍʿ* as it is with problematizing the elisions and selectivity of dominant Western discourses about gender and sexuality in the Middle East. In doing so, he introduces the notion of fractal orientalism, or “Orientalism within the Middle East,” to describe how Orientalism operates not simply through civilizational distinctions between the Occident and the so-called Orient, but simultaneously by distinguishing good “Oriental” places and practices—those that confirm notions of Western superiority and enable Western privileges, for example through tourism—from bad ones: those that challenge the universality and superiority of Western practices and don’t privilege Western comforts and teleologies (p. 7). In doing so, he shows that Orientalism operates not just through the exclusion of “backward” Oriental practices from civilization but also through line-drawing activities and practices of recognition that are “multiscalar” and operate on transnational, regional, national, and local scales. He recasts the recognition of Beirut as tolerant and gay friendly as another modality of Western cunning and subjectification, one that reinforces civilizational hierarchies and elides the local precarities and inequalities that make the lives of marginalized Beirutis, including queer ones, less livable. He shows through his interviews and ethnographic research how fractal orientalism mediates the everyday lives of his interlocutors in ways that reinforce local hierarchies and distinctions and uphold “exclusionary practices against undesirable racialized and classed others” (p. 36). For example, although he argues that “cosmopolitan Beirut’ is accessible as a gay-friendly space to gender-normative, secular, and middle- to upper-class LGBT people,” he shows that “marginalized queer Beirutis, particularly gender-nonnormative, genderqueer, and working-class individuals—among the people with the least protections and thus most impacted by *al-waḍʿ*—are most likely to question Beirut’s cosmopolitanism and to carve out new understandings of queer visibilities that challenge dominant understandings of modernity and progress” (pp. 58, 74).

He makes evident the ubiquity, conscripting power, and subject-constituting nature of Orientalism, emphasizing its often-overlooked affective dimensions and the privileges that it serves to sediment, but he also offers the hopeful insight that Orientalism, including in its fractal form, is not always efficacious in its effects. Indeed, the book does an impeccable job of avoiding essentializing analysis by introducing us to interlocutors who both embrace as well as challenge exceptionalizing discourses about gay-friendly and cosmopolitan Beirut and the universalizing expectations of Western scripts of legibility. Through the juxtaposition of multiple experiences, positionalities, and perspectives, Moussawi de-essentializes queer life in Beirut by showing that it is always mediated by gender, race, class, religion, region, citizenship, etc., and that the main struggles of his interlocutors are not only (although they also are of course) about gender and sexuality.

The book is written in an engaging and accessible style that blends theoretical insights with rich illustrative material that centers lived and embodied experiences as sources of knowledge, making it an ideal teaching book for undergraduate and graduate courses on feminist and queer theory, gender and sexuality, war and its aftermath, everyday life in urban centers, neoliberalism, and much more in the modern Middle East. It also is ideal for courses that seek to center subjugated knowledges, to speak back to dominant Western epistemologies, and to decolonize the production of knowledge about the region and about gender and sexuality. It is written from a clearly situated place and with a refreshing vulnerability and openness to paradox that invites reflection on the potentialities and vicissitudes of conducting research in contexts characterized by endemic precarity as well as on the ethics and politics of knowledge production for scholars from the Global South who are based in the US academy.

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