Sofian Merabet's \textit{Queer Beirut} examines spatialized forms of queer identity formation and performativity in the urban environment of Beirut and is a welcome contribution to the small but growing literature about queerness and homosexuality in the contemporary Middle East. Skillfully reconstructing the mobile experience of walking through the Lebanese capital for his readers, with great attention to the politics of urban space, Merabet is interested in the diverse and individual experiences and biographies of queer, mostly gay, men in post-civil war Beirut. He identifies queer as an analytic and "potentially rebellious" (p. 7) category with the ability to contest and appropriate space and asks how queer men negotiate, transform, and adapt spaces often not intended as sites of queer sociality and desire. Merabet demonstrates how, as marginal denizens of Beirut, queer men creatively navigate the composite world of homosexual encounters and relationships, as well as the dangers of homophobic violence, discrimination, and exclusion. \textit{Queer Beirut} approaches these topics through a rich ethnographic analysis of the versatile appropriations and contestations of space in which queer Lebanese men take part and is based on more than a decade of fieldwork in and around Beirut. For Merabet, doing an ethnography of space means that rather than seeing space as a passive background formed by human subjects, he gives space itself formative and transformative powers to structure and facilitate desires and encounters.

The two first chapters pay detailed attention to the emergence of new queer spaces. Merabet argues that the emergence of such spaces is related to post-civil war urban development, such as the remaking of Downtown Beirut, as well as to novel forms of nightlife and leisure. Both chapters chart a sexual and erotic map of Beirut and its environs by introducing the reader to a variety of "zones of encounter" (p. 5), which is to say, urban locations that allow for queer encounters. Clubs, cafés, concerts, the \textit{corniche} (Beirut's famous seaside promenade), particular corners and stretches of road, movie theaters, and social media platforms, when successfully produced as queer, become places where gay men can interact "on the basis of a common erotic desire" (p. 67). But even queer spaces, we learn, are never uniformly queer. Rather, they are always part of wider positions and belongings such as class, gender, sect, and nationality. While some spaces are queered against the odds of space-making, others might never, or only at night or momentarily, be queered. Other spaces, such as Beirut's gay Paradise Beach, are disappeared by the city's rapid privatization and commercialization.

Drawing on Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin, and Pierre Bourdieu, chapter 3, which could have perhaps more productively been placed at the beginning of the book, offers a rigorous and interdisciplinary methodological discussion. It meditates on what it means to do fieldwork in a city such as Beirut, where strict "hierarchies of urban mobility" (p. 74) mean that cars predominate the urban arena and where significant social stigma is associated with the use of shared taxis, buses, and walking. \textit{Queer Beirut} embraces the "queerness" and stigmas of walking. In fact, as Merabet convincingly demonstrates, since "access to the very spaces that manage to transcend the latent—and at times, manifest—rigidities of spatio-temporal fixities seem possible only through some
acquired art of pedestrian mobility” (p. 76), moving about the city on foot places the anthropologist in a privileged position to observe sites zones of encounter such as sites of male cruising. While the chapters collectively complement understandings of Lebanese identity that focus solely on sectarian and religious affiliation, the politics of sectarianism and the extremely contested and composite nature of space in Beirut is addressed specifically in chapter 4.

As with the preceding chapters, chapter 6 exhibits caution with regard to the casting of queer identity as automatically rebellious. It takes up the topics of external and internal, to the queer community, homophobia; policing of gay behavior deemed too feminine; and the possible repercussions faced by anyone threatening to upset the dictates of gender normativity. The chapter thus serves as a welcome warning against the pitfalls of theorizing agency as something always already subversive. Chapter 7 provides an informed ethnographic account of the nighttime corniche as “one of the foremost zones that facilitates the initiation into male homoerotic encounters in Beirut” (p. 166). As a site of male cruising, the corniche and a number of areas next to it “provide a broad stage for the occasional transgressive act and, in doing so, circumvent the otherwise endorsed order of general respectability” (p.158). Carefully considering the importance of class, Merabet notes that for many financially underprivileged young men, the free and public space of the corniche and the adjacent Ramlet al Bayda beach provide the only free and therefore viable entertainment venues. In contrast, in Beirut’s Downtown area queer men with more purchasing power can take part in novel forms of conspicuous consumption. The activity of frequenting clubs, cafes, restaurants, and shopping areas in Beirut’s redeveloped Downtown is structured and orchestrated simultaneously by global capitalism and local hierarchies and codes of prestige. In this setting, the correct performance of affluence is the ticket to the show and might ultimately secure some gay men a less vulnerable position. Thus, Queer Beirut insists on construing queer identity as simply one of multiple social positions and multiple, overlapped vulnerabilities, such as class vulnerability and the vulnerability of sexual marginality.

Merabet contends that although a multiplicity of bodies inhabit and parade throughout the urban setting of Beirut in ways that stress and enforce normative patterns of sociability, consumption, and sexuality, a careful analysis of sociocultural space can uncover “the numerous ways and techniques that enable many individuals and groups to continuously contest, appropriate, and adapt to it” (p. 246). It is these ways and techniques that Merabet elucidates across the book’s ten chapters. Using detailed ethnographic vignettes from Beirut’s commercialized and public spaces, including cafes, clubs, malls, beaches, and private homes, Queer Beirut exhibits a sustained focus on the agentive and performative aspects of Lebanese queer identity and eloquently shows how this identity manifests spatially and temporally, and is performed bodily through everyday practices. To this end, a Dunkin’ Donuts in a northern suburb and a staircase close to the Lebanese parliament in Downtown Beirut serve as compelling examples of counterappropriations of space.

Queer Beirut masterfully bridges disciplinary borders by engaging with an impressive and diverse body of scholarship, ranging from literary to anthropological and sociological theory. The book makes it clear that spatialized queer performativity has the potential to temporarily flout and outgrow more normative and conformist engagements with the urban milieu. However, Queer Beirut would have benefited from a less parsimonious involvement with recent scholarship on contemporary and historical forms of queerness and homosexuality in the Middle East. Many arguments in Queer Beirut would have been strengthened if the book had been in more explicit dialogue with works such as Joseph Massad’s Desireing Arabs (2007) and Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray’s edited Islamic Homosexualities (1997), to mention just two examples. The lack of engagement with works on Islamic and Middle Eastern homosexuals and sexualities is made more noticeable since Merabet mentions (chapter 7) the generationally constituted differences between queer and gay men in Lebanon and their varied notions about what might constitute homosexual and queer identity and practice. A more thorough engagement with both the regional and global historical context of modernity and the remaking of sexual identities would have made the book even stronger than it already is.

In another minor critique, Merabet’s experimental prose and very long ethnographic and biographic descriptions sometimes interfere with the narrative. The prose of the book tries to deal earnestly with a messy range of affective states, which sometimes makes for convoluted writing in turn and creates extra work for the reader. This is countered, however, by the fact that Merabet’s rich ethnography pays close and empathetic attention to the traumas, fears, and vulnerabilities of his informants and the violence with which they live, thus making the lives of queer Lebanese men available to those without access to the field. These concerns aside, Queer Beirut is an
indispensable read for students and scholars concerned with anthropology, interdisciplinary methodology, and queer, urban, and Lebanese studies.

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