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Queer Brands, Branding Queerness: Fractal Orientalism and Selling Gay-Friendly Beirut

1 The Making of Gay-Friendly Beirut

What makes a city, region, and/or country gay- or queer-friendly, and who determines what areas and spaces are deemed as such? How do designations of gay-friendliness circulate, and what are their consequences for places and the people who live and reside there? When it comes to South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), more specifically the Arab World, the relationship to gay-friendliness is paradoxical. That is, on the one hand, people associate SWANA and the Arab World as regions that are homophobic and, thus, labelled backward in comparison with their Euro-American counterparts. On the other hand, there is a proliferation of Euro-American journalistic accounts, travelogues, and gay tour guides about gay life in the Arab World, claiming that while the Arab World is homophobic, there are *some* places in the region that are *actually* gay-friendly – albeit in a way that is different from dominant understandings of LGBTQ life and gay-friendliness.

Taken together, these approaches have been used by Euro-American journalistic accounts to highlight Beirut as a gay-friendly destination in a “homophobic region.” To make the case that Beirut is gay-friendly, such travelogues and journalistic accounts simultaneously compare it with and distance it from Euro-American cities and cities in the Arab World. For example, they claim that while some aspects of gay life in Beirut might resemble those of a major European or American city, it will never be *as* open. However, given that it is part of the Arab World, Beirut becomes the best-case scenario for gay life in the region. Therefore, by distancing it from other Arab cities, which are seen as more homogeneous, these travelogues leave Beirut seeming cosmopolitan and somewhat similar, but not identical to European and US cities. Thus, Beirut seems exceptional only because it is part of the Arab World. Arriving at such assertions and to make gay life in Beirut intelligible to Western audiences, these accounts rely on Euro-American “metrics” of gay-friendliness like the presence of gay neighbourhoods, visible LGBTQ communities and LGBTQ organising, thriving gay nightlife, and legal protections to “measure” the extent to which Beirut is or can be gay-friendly. While these accounts speak of gay lives in the Arab World, they do not engage with the extensive scholarly literatures on non-normative gender and sexualities in the Arab

World, both historical and contemporary, which document the lives of LGBTQ individuals and communities from multiple perspectives.¹

The Orientalist positions mentioned above, such as using dominant metrics of gay-friendliness to locate gay life in the Arab World or claiming that the Arab World is a homogenous homophobic region, are vexing. These designations position places on a spectrum from gay-friendliness to homophobia that lead some spaces to be seen as progressive and forward-looking versus others that are traditional, homophobic, and “stuck in time,” without mentioning the histories and presents of colonialism that have shaped and reshaped gender and sexual cultures in those places.² Historically, Euro-American Orientalist travelogues have written about same-sex desires and practices in the Arab World documenting homosexual practices as being predominant and normalised aspects of the fabric of Arab societies, thereby marking the Arab and Muslim World as spaces of degeneracy and sexual licentiousness in comparison with centres of empire, mostly Europe.³ However, more contemporary non-scholarly iterations about gay life in the Arab World focus on and highlight the homophobic nature of the region by citing the continuous existence of colonial anti-sodomy laws and the lack of legal protections for sexual and gender minorities. This shift from representing the Arab and Muslim World as degenerate regions where people practice homosexuality to contemporary representations of these spaces as homophobic due to the lack of legal and social protections for LGBTQ people shows how metrics for sexual openness are arbitrary, change over time, and how dominant brandings of places as gay-friendly become a sign of progressiveness.

In this piece, I reflect on the case of Beirut, which has become branded as an exceptional gay-friendly city in the Arab World, from the year 2005 onwards. From pre-civil war designations of Beirut as the Paris or the Switzerland of the Middle East, to contemporary iterations of Beirut as the Provincetown, Christopher Street, or San Francisco of the region, Euro-American spaces become the optic by which Beirut can be understood as gay-friendly, but only to a certain extent.⁴ In the following, I first ask what it means to determine a space as gay-friendly and whom are they deemed to be gay-friendly for? Second, I unpack the ways that cities

1 See El-Rouayheb, 2005; Khalaf and Gagnon, 2006; Makarem, 2011; Merabet, 2014; Naber and Zaatari, 2014; Moussawi, 2015, 2020; Chamas, 2021.

2 See Rao, 2020.

3 See Puar, 2002; Patil, 2018; Moussawi, 2020.

4 Provincetown is a coastal city on Cape Cod peninsula, Massachusetts, known as a gay-friendly destination in the US, whereas Christopher Street is a major street in the West Village in New York City, where, provoked by police brutality and violence against gay and trans people, the 1969 Stonewall riots took place.

and countries become branded as gay-friendly, either by internal or external ascriptions. Doing so, I illustrate how Beirut has become branded as a gay-friendly destination through a process I call “fractal Orientalism.” Third, I pay particular attention to the structural and political consequences that such designations create and set in place. Drawing on my ethnography of queer formations and everyday violence in Beirut, I show how these brandings affect local LGBTQ and queer communities, arguing that they produce shrinking LGBTQ spaces for local queer people – particularly trans, genderqueer, working-class people, and racially minoritised refugees. In addition, given my experience as an “expert witness” for gay asylum seekers from the Middle East, I demonstrate how these representations have made it much harder for LGBTQ people to seek asylum if they reside in Lebanon. While one can focus on regions, countries, cities, or spaces within cities, in this piece I move between multiple scales of analysis to capture the complex processes involved in such brandings and the (un)intended consequences they have on local queer communities.

2 Branding Gay-Friendliness

Since the mid-1990s, gay-friendly designations have become central in coding places as progressive and/or backward and traditional. Often, spaces in the Global South are seen as inherently homophobic and as places where gay people cannot live and thrive. When some places are “found” to be gay-friendly, they are regarded with surprise and seen as exceptional, given the geographic location they are placed in. One cannot think of brands without highlighting processes of packaging and commodifying spaces and people as available for consumption to those with economic or other forms of privilege, such as national, racial, gender, or class privilege. That is, brands are central to the workings of neoliberalism and transnational racial capitalism that attempt to “sell” commodities. Applied to gay-friendliness, such brands promise potential tourists (and some residents) experiences of sexual freedom and liberation, even if fleeting.

When people think of gay tourism, they don’t often think of the Arab World as a destination, though historically, North Africa and the Levant have been described as places for homosexual self-exploration for European white men and travellers.⁵ Travel and encounters with people in “foreign” places have a history of racialising populations and places through the relational uses of gender and sexual normativity. For example, metropolises and centres of empire have historically used first-per-

⁵ See Boone, 1995, 2014; Moussawi, 2013.

son written accounts and encounters, such as travelogues, to document gender and sexual non-normativities in the Global South to relationally define and uphold *their own* proper and normative gender and sexual cultures.⁶ Thus, to speak about gay-friendliness and gay-friendly designations, one needs to pay attention to colonialism and empire, not as merely historical events, but also – to borrow Patrick Wolfe’s conceptualisation of settler colonialism – as structures that endure.⁷ Though Lebanon “allegedly” gained independence from the French in 1945, centres of empire still determine the extent to which the country and its capital city are or have the potential to be gay-friendly.

While some states are currently making various efforts to brand their country, nation, and/or cities as gay-friendly to attract the “pink dollar,” the case of Beirut is different, as it is a city that has become branded as gay-friendly through mostly external factors, such as Euro-American press and other outlets mentioned above. Some countries use gay-friendliness and gay rights as a sign of progressiveness to distract from violent state-led practices against other minorities, a process that has become known as “pinkwashing.”⁸ While gay-friendly brands are used as a means to attract and mobilise the pink economy, what happens when centres of empire brand a city as gay-friendly?

3 Fractal Orientalism

My book *Disruptive Situations* addresses the ways Beirut has become gay-friendly and how such discourses are circulated at multiple levels: global, regional, and local, using what I call fractal Orientalism or “Orientalism within the Middle East.” Since the Syrian troops’ withdrawal from Lebanon in 2015, Beirut has been hailed as the new gay-friendly destination in the region. The discourses that circulated around this new branding of Beirut came from Euro-American travelogues, journalistic accounts, and gay travel guides, such as *Spartacus International* – the most widely sold gay tour guide. Besides the examples given above, Beirut has also been dubbed, e.g., the “Amsterdam,” “French Riviera,” and “sin city” of the Middle East.⁹ Based on first-person narratives by white gay cisgender men in Beirut, these travelogues circulate narratives about these travellers’ experiences of the city’s gay life – though never through the lens of those who reside there. In these travelogues, locals are painted as non-agentic; rather, they become racialised subjects who would do

⁶ See Patil, 2018.

⁷ See Wolfe, 2006.

⁸ For more on pinkwashing and Israel, see Schulman, 2011.

⁹ Quotes from Moussawi, 2020: 29.

anything to cater to white gay tourists. For example, some journalists, travelogues, and gay guides report that even Lebanese and Arab heterosexual men engage in same-sex acts with white Euro-American tourists. They “explain that this sexual ‘fluidity’ (read as confusion) is due to the lack of a clearly defined and developed gay identity” and as an inherent attraction to and desire for whiteness (though not explicitly spelled out as such).¹⁰

To understand how cities become externally branded as gay-friendly, I argue that we must use multi-scalar analysis that attends to the changing nature of relational understanding of the “other.” As Edward Said argues, discourses circulate and recirculate through citational practices.¹¹ These travelogues cite each other as examples of “truth” or evidence of gay life in Beirut. To gauge gay life in cities, people usually look for the presence of laws that protect sexual and gender minorities and the presence of gay-friendly establishments, gaybourhoods, and activist spaces. Building on postcolonial and transnational feminisms, I suggest that these contemporary neoliberal representations of Beirut use and rely on what I call fractal Orientalism, which “uses relational distinctions to produce Lebanon as exceptional and gay friendly – that is, ‘modern,’ but *only* within the context of the Arab World.”¹² Taken from mathematics, physics, and geometry, fractals are geometric shapes that repeat themselves infinitely across multiple scales.¹³ They are found in nature, for example in snowflakes, tree branches, and lightning, yet they “hide in plain sight.”¹⁴

Scale and fractals become important heuristics to unpack how Beirut becomes branded as gay-friendly in these travelogues. Rather than take for granted that Orientalism produces a single binary of East/West, I zoom in and out to capture the multiple scales by which fractal Orientalism simultaneously works, using the same distinctions (i. e. on each level), such as progressive/traditional or gay-friendly/homophobic. At the global level, the West is seen as more gay-friendly than the Arab World. At the regional level, Lebanon is seen as more open than its Arab counterparts. Furthermore, the same binary is used at the national level, where Beirut becomes the only gay-friendly city in the midst of “the homophobic” rural areas and cities in Lebanon. Finally, this extends to neighbourhoods within Beirut, where Christian quarters are described as freer and more open than their Muslim counterparts. As a theoretical lens, fractal Orientalism “is an imperial structure or imposition that functions transnationally, regionally, at the level of the nation and the

¹⁰ Moussawi, 2020: 45.

¹¹ See Said, 1978.

¹² Moussawi, 2020: 8.

¹³ For more, see Moussawi, 2020.

¹⁴ For more on fractals, see Rose, 2012.

city; hence, it provides us with a multi-scalar spatial model that uncovers how distinctions are made, circulated, and remade.”¹⁵ Therefore, it is based on processes of othering that are constantly shifting. While these fractal Orientalist accounts rely on the co-existence of difference – primarily through the narrative of Beirut as a city that encompasses 18 different religious sects, where no one sect is a majority – it is done by means of a neoliberal practice that aims to celebrate and sell Beirut as a cosmopolitan city, unlike its Arab counterparts. Celebrating Beirut’s diversity and difference without attention to structural inequalities erases the experiences of the majority who are actively marginalised and dispossessed by the state. In addition, such celebrations of difference rely on flattened understandings of diversity and culture.

While this branding of Beirut as gay-friendly is not an internal ascription, some segments of Beirut society reproduce these narratives, defending their experience of Beirut as a gay-friendly city. However, this is done only by those who are structurally privileged, whether through gender, class, citizenship, and racial privileges. Those who do argue that Beirut is, indeed, exceptional, including local gay tourist organisations, refer to victories in gay rights by citing the Lebanese Medical Professional Association’s outlawing of the French anal examinations or the fact that the anti-sodomy law hasn’t been applied lately. However, this is not the case, since the anti-sodomy French penal code continues to target those who already occupy marginalised positions in society.¹⁶ That is, these marginalised communities are legally persecuted for their practices, while others from upper social strata and white gay tourists are not.

4 External Branding and its Structural and Political Consequences

As demonstrated throughout this reflection, focusing on the gay-friendly nature of Beirut obscures structural inequalities, people’s relation to power, and the state-led violence against those who are already marginalised. By branding Beirut as a gay-friendly destination and city, these travelogues, guides, and journalistic accounts assume and create a homogenous LGBTQ population in Lebanon, without attending to the pluralities and inequalities that constitute these communities. While painting Beirut as gay-friendly, these representations focus only on cis-white gay

¹⁵ Moussawi, 2020: 7–8.

¹⁶ See Makarem, 2011.

men's experiences and their encounters with other cisgender men. Thus, they completely erase the experiences of trans, genderqueer persons, and women.

Not everyone has access to experience Beirut as gay-friendly, particularly those who are already structurally marginalised by Lebanese society and the state, such as queer refugees, trans, non-binary, and gender non-normative persons and working-class people, to name a few. In these accounts, one of the first consequences is that Beirut becomes branded as gay-friendly by erasing the inherent structural inequalities within Lebanese and Beirut societies. Beirut becomes gay-friendly for upwardly mobile, white, able-bodied men who have the privileges of transnational mobility. That is not to say that gay-friendly cities in the Global North are all-inclusive, given that gay-friendly destinations still discriminate against certain populations, whether in the United States or Europe. For example, gay-friendly spaces are still racialised, classed, laud gender normativity, and are ableist.¹⁷

Second, when these first-person narratives circulated in global journalistic outlets, such as the *New York Times* and gay travel guides like *Spartacus International*, they outed a number of gay establishments and spaces, giving them an international reputation for being gay-friendly. Gay establishments that were featured in the accounts gained international visibility and became even more inaccessible to Lebanese LGBTQ populations, by becoming more expensive – since they can now rely on the transnational pink dollar. In addition, such bars and informal cruising areas became well-known in the city and thus suffered from more scrutiny and surveillance. This created shrinking spaces and even more limited access for segments of Lebanese LGBTQ communities.

Third, and one of the most devastating consequences, is that this branding has made and continues to make it much harder for those who are seeking asylum outside of Lebanon for fear of persecution for being gay, lesbian, trans, and/or HIV-positive. Black and Brown LGBTQ asylum seekers are seen and treated with suspicion by Western European and North American nation-states, through racialised processes and the assumptions that they are trying to “trick” the asylum and immigration systems. Thus, they have to endure not just the precarious lives they are living, but the burden of proof to show that they are *actually* lesbian, gay, and/or trans – as understood by dominant framings of gayness and trans-ness. That is, they must *illustrate* that they are actually queer, and their proofs must be intelligible, believed, and accepted by immigration official and courts.

In my experience as an “expert witness” for LGBTQ asylum seekers from Lebanon, Western European and US immigration laws and courts have made it much

17 See El-Tayeb, 2011; Haritaworn, 2015.

harder, if not impossible, for Lebanese LGBTQ individuals to gain asylum. Courts draw on the representations of Beirut as gay-friendly and open, thus creating a greater “burden of proof” for those seeking asylum from Lebanon than for refugees from other Arab or Muslim countries. This not only impacts Lebanese people, but also Syrian and Palestinian refugees who try to seek asylum outside of Lebanon based on their gender and sexuality. Thus, in my own work, I have to provide much more context to show how Beirut is gay-friendly *only* for those who already occupy privileged positions in society. Many have been denied asylum because Beirut has been branded a gay-friendly destination. While branding cities as gay-friendly might attract more economic prosperity through gay tourism, it does have a number of consequences that further the marginalisation and dispossession of those who do not enjoy class, racial, and gender- and sexual-normative privileges. As long as we use dominant Euro-American metrics of gay-friendliness to arbitrarily “assess” other places – like visibility, pride parades, openly gay establishments, and rainbow flags – we will continue to reproduce Orientalist narratives of the Middle East and Arab World, without any attention to nuance and the complexities of LGBTQ lives.

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