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In a pivotal scene in Sahar Mandour’s 2011 novel 32, the unnamed protagonist-narrator, a thirty-two year old author, announces to her friends while riding in a car that she intends to write a story. “Not a novel, just a story. An ordinary story (qissa ‘adiyya), like the stories of the ordinary days (ayyam ‘adiyya) in which we live.”¹ Her friends Zumurrud, Shwikar and Zizi enthusiastically encourage her to write “our story, we who are living in Beirut today.”² But when she eventually shares a completed draft with them, they respond with awkward silence. The mortified narrator confronts her embarrassed friends about their reactions, and they all agree that her story about a suicidal woman is beautiful, but sad. A disappointed Zumurrud elaborates: “I thought you would stick to the project you told us about in the car. I loved the idea of everyday life, since most of the novels that I read deal with the exceptional. I wanted to read about the ordinary, because it is ordinary!”³

Societies that emerge from violence value the ordinary.⁴ Yet cultural production emphasizing crisis and the spectacular often overshadows that which documents the ordinary. In Lebanon, critics and readers assign lit-
erary and cultural prestige to treatments of the civil war (1975-1990) and its memory. But, as Zeina Halabi has noted, in recent years a “fatigue of the memory discourse” has emerged in Lebanese fiction and cinema. 32 stages this frustration in the many arguments among the narrator and her friends over the stories she keeps writing about Beirut: tales of suicidal women, and of kidnapping and torture that her friends have read many times before. As in the excerpt above, the narrator’s friends counter her dramatic writing with their desires to “read the ordinary” and to find “ourselves in the story.” Zumurrud’s impatience with “most of the novels” she reads is a literary complaint against the prevalence of narratives of exceptional conflict and trauma. By downplaying the exceptional, Mandour’s characters privilege ordinariness. The fifth and final chapter of Hilal Chouman’s Limbo Beirut (2013) echoes this sentiment. Musing that when the exceptional becomes the norm, it becomes forgettable, the chapter’s narrator concludes that “too much exceptionalism is tiring.” Mandour and Chouman’s novels question the literary legacy of postwar Lebanese writing by insinuating that some of its most familiar tropes and patterns are no longer relevant to their lives. The novels express their frustration with this familiar kind of writing, thereby making room for their own so-called ordinary stories.

Ordinariness, however, is an elusive object of desire with a fraught relationship to representation. Kathleen Stewart writes that the ordinary is “a moving target. Not something to make sense of, but a set of sensations that incite.” Thinking the ordinary, Stewart says, forces readers away from structures and compels them to contend with how “a reeling present is composed out of heterogeneous and non-coherent singularities.” This article examines three novels whose plots reel across the mundane, often incoherent lives of mostly middle-class, twenty- and thirty-something urban professionals in Ras Beirut. As 32’s narrator attempts to write the “ordinary novel of ordinary life,” she and her friends do ordinary things. They go on road trips, hang out in bars, and socialize in each others’ houses. Chouman’s 2010 novel Napolitana follows a young man named Haitham through his daily routine in Beirut. In the course of the novel, Haitham comes to terms with a failed relationship, reads a blog, acts as a third wheel in his friends’ rocky relationship, and has a complicated love affair with an older, upper-class woman. Limbo Beirut, the follow-up to Napolitana, is more formally experimental than either its predecessor or 32. It is told in
five parts, from five different perspectives. Not quite a graphic novel, it is nevertheless illustrated, each segment drawn by a different artist, making the whole a fascinating collaborative work. Limbo is set in May 2008, when armed violence broke out in Beirut between partisans of March 8 and March 14, the two political groups formed in the aftermath of Rafiq al-Hariri’s 2005 assassination. Each of the novel’s five characters—a gay artist, a novelist, a pregnant woman, a former militiaman, and an emergency-room resident doctor—experiences these events separately, but their stories eventually connect. Despite its eventful backdrop, Limbo, like Napolitana and 32, attends more closely to the details that make up the ordinary, such as street traffic, neighbors, and walks in the city, than to political violence.

A close reading of these novels fleshes out the complexities of everyday life for a postwar, post-memory generation coming to terms with adulthood in Beirut today. In accentuating these desires for the ordinary, the novels perform a dual literary and political protest. Without denying the impact of the war, these novels suggest that civil war trauma narratives are inadequate for understanding the current moment and also distract readers from consideration of present problems. Deeply embedded in the present, 32, Limbo, and Napolitana move toward a new form of writing that communicates contemporary Beirut’s visceral reality.

My use of the term visceral invokes Lauren Berlant’s connection between affect and form in her 2011 work Cruel Optimism. Berlant argues that in moments of impasse, “when one no longer knows what to do or how to live and yet, while unknowing, must adjust,” cultural and artistic genres emerge that reflect upon and mediate this adjustment. While there are historical continuities between this moment in Lebanon’s history and its past, it is also clear to observers that the situation in the country has changed since 2005. Yet, as Kristin Monroe notes, the scholarship on Lebanon has been slow to catch up to changes in everyday life experience. Perhaps this lag is understandable, as the present is frustratingly intangible even in less eventful places than Lebanon. The ordinary is messy, and must be “mapped through different, coexisting forms of composition.” Literature can thus become a privileged means of exploring the ordinary concerns of the present.

The three novels under discussion in this article map out different narratives of managing everyday life in Beirut. In the first section, I argue that these novels distinguish themselves from predominant cultural narratives.
by rejecting the war’s cultural legacy. In the second section, I demonstrate that these novels not only reject earlier tropes but also begin to model what writing the ordinary might look like. I term this reclamation “making ordinary.” The novels approach the ordinary from many angles, emphasizing the affective everyday resonances between place and individuals. These resonances impart a sense of how it feels to inhabit Beirut at this moment in time. Literature’s formal ability to evoke affect facilitates explorations of present anxieties. Reading these contemporary works closely, we gain a sense of which crises the characters feel are insurmountable and which are manageable. This sense allows us to understand the present on its own terms. These novels render Beirut’s occasional violence and insecurity mundane. By tracking the novels’ affective registers, we apprehend that the greatest obstacle to hopes for ordinary life is Beirut’s mounting socio-economic precarity.

**Interrogating the Past**

Neither obsessed with the country’s violent past nor in denial about it, these novels display complicated understandings of the war that parallel those of many young people who belong to Lebanon’s post-memory generation. In Lebanese literary studies, the term “post-memory” describes a generation of writers too young to have experienced the war as adults or young adults, but whose novels directly or indirectly engage with the war’s legacies. In *Writing Beirut*, Samira Aghacy discusses Renée Hayek’s *Beirut 2002* as an example of recent post-memory Lebanese fiction. *Beirut 2002* offers a cautionary tale of youth whose complete disconnection from the country’s past ultimately leads them astray. Such novels replicate the older generations’ anxieties about young people’s amnesia regarding the war. Craig Larkin’s recent anthropological work challenges these assumptions. Larkin nuances generational anxieties about Lebanon’s youth by showing that youth are aware of the war and its residual effects, yet frustrated with the manner in which the older generation has coped with it. Like the youth Larkin interviewed, the characters in these three novels cannot escape the Lebanese civil war. The war’s traces frequently emerge in their lives. In 32, for example, when a car bomb kills a member of Parliament, the narrator tells us “the war is over, but its memories come fast and plentiful with every explosion. Memories?
Not quite memories that come from a distant past. It’s more like a reality that falls over the present, fitting it, transparent, becoming a part of it.”

Although 32 is sensitive to the repercussions of Lebanon’s violent history in the present, it nevertheless seeks to distance itself from the war, as do Napolitana and Limbo.

Affective responses such as the fatigue and exasperation expressed by the embedded readers in 32 distance these novels from postwar Lebanese culture’s fixation on the spectacular and the traumatic. That fixation also dominates cultural work about Lebanon. 32, Limbo, and Napolitana question specific civil war tropes, such as the bereaved woman and the militiaman. They deliberately sideline others, like the family. This move distinguishes them not only from the war novels of the 1980s and 1990s, but also from the post-memory fiction of the 2000s.

The family’s role in the transmission of memory and histories both personal and political is central to the premise of post-memory. Perhaps the most cited work on the concept is Marianne Hirsch’s *Family Frames*, an exploration of the photograph’s role in transmitting generational memories. The family has loomed large over many generations of Lebanese literature. Critics have understood the family dysfunction in novels by canonical authors such as Rashid al-Da’if, Hanan al-Shaykh, or Huda Barakat as a metaphor for the breakdown of traditional family and social structures. In the 1980s and 1990s, Lebanese novels invoked multiple generations in order to process the legacy of war and to interrogate issues of memory, responsibility, and accountability. In such iconic novels as Barakat’s *The Tiller of Waters*, al-Shaykh’s *The Story of Zahra* and *Beirut Blues*, and Da’if’s *Dear Mr. Kawabata*, the clash between generations often articulates the clash between traditional and contemporary culture. I have argued elsewhere that Mazen Kerbaj and Lena Merhej’s post-2006 war graphic novels effectuate a reconciliation between generations, triggered by the newfound ability of now-adult children to empathize with their parents’ experiences of the earlier conflict.

By contrast, 32 and Napolitana discard this trope completely. In these novels, parents and extended families are completely absent from the lives of their adult children and from the narrative. The absence of family does not mean that the characters are socially alienated. Rather, these novels depict social networks consisting of tight groups of friends who take care of each other. Within these urban groupings, peer
relationships replace cross-generational familial ones. These novels are making way for new forms of adulthood, asserting their independence from traditional structures of family and narrative alike.

The novels also address the literary legacies of war writing by portraying traumatic bereavement narratives as being inauthentic in the present context. The Lebanese civil war emerges in *Napolitana* through the complicated story of Haitham’s entanglement with an older, upper-class woman named Yumna. Several months after an initial encounter at a party, the relationship collapses when Haitham rearranges a room in Yumna’s house that contains stacks of books and a classical Arabic poem on the wall. Yumna breaks down when she sees that Haitham has disrupted this frozen-in-time literary space, and Haitham eventually leaves. Later, Yumna explains her breakdown in the novel’s only chapter written in the first person. In this formally disruptive chapter, Yumna addresses Haitham and notes that the untouched library belongs to her husband, an intellectual who “left” at the end of the civil war in the late 1980s. *Napolitana* uses the ambiguous word *rahil* (departure) to describe the husband’s disappearance. Yumna explicitly says that she will not divulge any more details about it. She is deeply attached to keeping her past intact, and refuses to provide Haitham (or the reader) with more information. In this manner, *Napolitana* dramatizes the mutual frustration that characterizes relations between the established intellectual and cultural elite and the new generation. Intriguingly, the following chapter reveals that Yumna’s first-person explanation was a figment of Haitham’s imagination. *Napolitana* manipulates its reader by explaining Yumna’s behavior as the result of a melodramatic story, then revealing that this story is Haitham’s immature attempt to understand behavior that he otherwise cannot. Chouman thus demonstrates that he is fully capable of writing that kind of war narrative, but chooses not to. *Napolitana* ends with Haitham sitting down at a computer and beginning to find his own literary voice through a blog about Beirut.

Though *Limbo* is more willing to explore the civil war and its legacies than either *Napolitana* or 32, it mobilizes war tropes so as literally to lay them to rest. In *Limbo*, the remnant figure of the war is not a bereaved woman, but a militiaman. The militiaman is a classed figure in Lebanese art, often portrayed as “ignorant, ill-disciplined, predatory, and only marginally in control of his (or, on occasion, her) weapon.” Even in texts that portray
fighters with more nuance, such as Huda Barakat’s *Sayyidi wa Habibi* or Rawi Hage’s *De Niro’s Game*, class remains central.\(^{37}\) The militiaman is the only working-class character in *Limbo* and the only character who fought during the civil war. *Limbo*, however, narrates his story in the first person, and through this perspective he emerges as a thoughtful, contemplative, and slightly mournful figure. Forced into carrying a gun and patrolling the streets after the 7 May 2008 events, he dies when another character runs him over while rushing to the airport. Ironically (or perhaps not), the killer is a young novelist who had been suffering from writer’s block in his attempts to write about Lebanon. He overcomes the blockage that very night and writes three chapters of his new book. The final erasure of the militiaman from the collective account comes when the young ER doctor whose narrative concludes the novel decides to forget the telephone number that the dead man had tattooed on his arm. The doctor reflects that in order to “continue my life, I must lay the armed man’s corpse to rest.”\(^{38}\) In its final sentences the novel thus becomes a meditation on storytelling, as the doctor continues, “maybe I should contribute to making the story, that I was a part of, reach its end. Maybe.”\(^{39}\) By laying the militiaman to rest, the novel signals its desire to move beyond certain tropes of war writing. The doctor’s “maybes” express an awareness of the difficulty of this undertaking.

32 is both the most metafictional of the three novels and the one that most explicitly pushes at the limits of traumatic war narratives and questions their relevance to the lives of the author and her friends. It does so through the story of Hayat, an old friend of the narrator’s. Several years prior to the narrative, a car bomb targeted at a member of Parliament killed Hayat’s fiancé. Hayat is unable to cope with the loss, and moves to Paris to begin a new life. She corresponds with the narrator and eventually commits suicide after writing her a final e-mail and text message. Devastated, the narrator withdraws into her house until her group of friends intervenes to help her recover. But 32 undermines this traumatic narrative almost immediately. Once the narrator’s friends are gathered, the narrator confesses that writing about everyday life has caused her to suffer from writer’s block. She sought to dissolve her panic by reaching to the opposite narrative extreme and inventing a fictional account of a traumatized woman who cannot put the war behind her.

32’s plot structure, in which the narrator is writing a story and sharing it with her friends, makes the novel a site from which to question the literary
merit of trauma narratives. After the narrator confesses that she invented Hayat’s story to resolve her writer’s block, she lets her friends read the pages. As I described in the introduction, the friends agree that the story is nicely done, but advance the critique that it has no bearing on their lives. Eventually, the narrator agrees with her readers that “the story was exaggerated. Her story . . . it was exaggerated. Overly tragic. As if she insisted upon dying, despite the fact that everyone lost someone in the war, and found a way afterward back to life.” By critiquing the melodrama of Hayat’s story, the narrator relates her frustration with Hayat’s story to the effects of the civil war, and to the (in)ability to move past it.

By stating that the war has affected everyone, the frustrated narrator dismisses the uniqueness of Hayat’s experience. The narrator seeks to move beyond such narratives, albeit without a clear sense of how that could happen. But the novel does not end the conversation on that dismissive note. The narrator’s friend Shwikar intrudes, saying, “Who told you that ‘everyone’ adapted to life in the war? And who told you that those who lost loved ones and stayed alive lived happy lives?” By allowing a plurality of voices, the novel performs a critique and counter-critique of war narratives. But it also clearly indicates that these are not necessarily the stories that interest the narrator or her friends. By distancing their stories from these traumatic narratives, Chouman and Mandour suggest that it may be necessary to move beyond an exclusive focus on the civil war and its forms of narration without dismissing the past and its effects.

32’s desire to sever itself from earlier literary conventions and tropes is most clearly articulated as an ethical investment in the present:

I don’t like to feel melancholic about standing in front of ruins (atlal) that millions share with me. . . . Is it a love for solitude? No, just a phrase that suddenly filled my mind . . . it said, some yearn for the past (hunak man yahinn ila al-madi) and continually lament the present. And some deal with the present as it is, and have a hand in creating the future (hunak man yata’amal ma’ al-hadir kama huwa, li-takun lahu yad fi sina’at ghadihi). By invoking atlal, Mandour distinguishes her project from an older postwar literary genre that Ken Seigneurie labels “elegiac humanism.” This 1990s
genre frequently reached into the classical Arabic tradition to describe and reclaim Beirut’s ruined center. Mandour’s narrator rejects this melancholic, nostalgic mode of describing Beirut. Her pragmatic call to deal with the present “as it is” connects discursively to looking forward to the future. In the paragraph, the past is simply al-madi (the past), but the future is possessive, ghadihi (his future). With the possessive pronoun attached, the noun comes to denote a universal ownership of the future. The novel implies that while the past is generic, shared by millions, the future is/can be literally made personal by focusing on the present.

In the subsequent paragraph, the narrator writes, “I wanted to deal with the situation as it is (al-waqi’ kama huwa), and to seek those who are like me, in order to make for myself a tomorrow that is less burdensome than the past.” The deliberate echo of kama huwa (as it is) creates a parallel between the present and “the situation.” By transforming the abstract “some” of the first to the more concrete “I” in the second, it is as if the narrator is coming into her own. By focusing on the present and the everyday, acknowledges the past’s impact on the present while carving out a new mode of writing, one that is more in tune with the “situation as it is” on the individual and collective levels.

Making Ordinary

As the novels distance themselves from the past, they turn their attention to writing the “present as it is,” a notoriously complex endeavor. Both the present and the ordinary challenge representational and generic boundaries, as neither can be adequately fixed without becoming its own antithesis. To do justice to the ordinary present, Kathleen Stewart suggests, one must approach it from many different angles that foreground its affective impacts. The three novels eschew narrative structure and instead dramatize the search for an adequate way to narrate the present. This search entails borrowing from other genres, spanning the visual to the virtual. Napolitana’s Haitham continuously imagines scenes from his life and those of and his friends as the opening montages of films with voice-overs narrating the everyday routine of the person in question. By novel’s end, he is writing a blog about his life in Beirut. Mandour’s protagonist is attempting to write “our story, we who are living in Beirut today, and are aged 30,” in a novel.
equally comfortable with the language of Egyptian cinema and the conventions of Lebanese fiction. Limbo is populated by novelists, artists, and designers reacting to the events going on around them. For example, the first chapter is about a young artist who spends the night of the 7 May 2008 clashes making posters, which he sticks up on the city walls the next day. The second chapter is about a novelist with writer’s block. Limbo engages in this generic interplay by wedding the visual and the textual in its collaborative form. In their open-endedness and formal inconclusivity, these novels do not attempt to fit their everyday Beirut into a structure. Rather, they reproduce the affect of ordinary urban life “by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes [it] habitable and animate.”

In 32, Limbo, and Napolitana, the intensity and texture of everyday life in Beirut are bound up with anxiety. The ambient disquiet is perhaps unsurprising in works about Lebanon, where a dizzying slew of often-violent events since 2005, combined with memories of the fifteen-year civil conflict, have shaped a complex affective atmosphere. As Sami Hermez notes, there is a state of generalized anxiety in the country, particularly concerning a strongly sensed violence yet to come. In 32, the narrator frequently and often humorously describes the particularly gendered anxieties Beiruti women experience daily, from being catcalled on the street to being caught up in a bar fight between two male patrons on a girls’ night out. In Napolitana, Haitham experiences physical discomfort and dizziness reading about the hazards of Beirut’s noise pollution. When Haitham blogs about “Beirut’s mood today” using song lyrics from popular music, the first line of the first song is: “There comes a time when all hope disappears.”

Yet the novels discursively attempt to assert the ordinary even when it is ruptured and disrupted by violence. In this effort, too, they are writing against the legacy of trauma, as the return to ordinariness and routine is a fundamental sign of recovery and resilience. They each manipulate textual anxiety but then perform resilience by reasserting mundanity. For example, while Haitham’s lyrical poem about “Beirut’s mood today” begins despondently and anxiously, its closing line is “Don’t worry, be happy.” In Limbo, this assertion of the ordinary happens on a macro level in the concluding chapter. As the chapter starts, the doctor is composing a letter to his ex-girlfriend and analyzing their relationship. The preceding night’s violent events are not a high priority for him as he returns home from
the hospital. By enmeshing the doctor's feelings about the conflict in his anguish about the failed relationship, *Limbo* suggests an equivalency. The novelist neutralizes the impact of the conflict by equating it to something mundane, though not painless, like a breakup. The final pages of the novel go one step further by intimating that there is a path to recovery. The doctor resolves to “walk on the street against traffic. And find life returning to [its] normal (sa-amshi 'ala rasif al-shari' bi-'aks ittijah al-sayr. Wa ajid al-hayat 'adat li-tabi'atiha).”59 If violence and/or the breakup disrupted the habitual rhythm of the streets, reclaiming the routine of walking the city streets can resolve these disruptions. The possessive suffix at the end of the Arabic word *tabi'a* discursively emphasizes that life's “natural state” is its normative one. Despite the unordinary experiences of the night before, the resolute Arabic future-tense prefix *sa* emphasizes that the everyday will reassert itself through the narrator’s determination.

If in *Limbo* we see the mundane reasserting itself on a macro level, in 32 the process of making ordinary is evident in its form and in its characters’ oft-articulated desires to write or be part of an ordinary story. Mandour’s novel juxtaposes the mundane with the extreme in many instances. For example, Mandour’s characters react excessively and melodramatically when the narrator reveals that she is writing a book, a moment the novel compares to Nasser’s speech announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal. By contrast, they react with uncharacteristic calm and sobriety to an event like a car bomb. The novel often plays up these exaggerated emotions for humor, such as when the narrator worries about using her last cell phone credit to call a friend because she may be killed by armed men and need to notify someone of her murder.60 Significantly, violence is not absent from the novel’s mundane. But by writing these concerns down, 32 simultaneously demystifies and contains them.

The tensions, anxieties, and occasional violence of living in Beirut sometimes rupture the narrative. For example, in the following passage the city assaults the narrator on several levels: “I exit, I walk, I lose my marbles (afqid a'sabi) over a honking horn, then I lose the remainder over a motorcycle squishing me on the sidewalk, then I collapse (anhar) from a catcall aimed at a particular part of my anatomy.”61 Being on the street produces heightening emotions through sensation (the noise of the horn), contact (getting pushed to the side by a motorcycle), and gender (being
that catcalled). Through its language, the paragraph performs the mounting stress and anxiety of walking while female in Beirut. In the Arabic, the first two clauses are single verbs—akhruj and amshi—and their presence at the beginning of the sentence accentuates the staccato tone of the act of walking down the street. Then, as external factors complicate that everyday act and the tension mounts, the clauses grow longer, as if echoing the hurdles that Mandour must clear as a female pedestrian in her everyday life in Beirut. But the sentence immediately following this passage is, “Then I get home.” This simple, prosaic sentence not only contrasts heavily with the tense, taut, and fraught language of anxiety and collapse, but also contains it, normalizes it, and defuses its tension and anxiety.

In another instance of discursive making-ordinary, the narrator stands on her balcony and contemplates the calm of Ras Beirut:

The trouble with calm is that one shout (za’qa) of a happy child can break it. In calm, loud noises become even more aberrant, targeting the ear and directly penetrating into the mood, making it bloody, just as a person loses his mind because of a honking horn that strikes his ear, if that ear were basking in calm beforehand (tan'am bi-l-hudu' qablahu). Life in this country attempts to make an individual accustomed to digesting the largest possible din of horns (tu'awwid al-fard 'ala hadm akbar nisba mumkina min al- zamamir) . . . their horns (zamamirhum) could wrest someone out of their human skin and put him in a fiery, fanged state. And they’re free. They’re free to scream, they’re free to fight on a night out, and to curse, and to harass others, and to evict people from their homes, whether through violence or through the smell of cigars. They’re all free.62

As in the previous example, the passage proceeds by creating an atmosphere of tension and anxiety before resolving it. It rapidly shifts gears three times, moving from the personal to the collective. Initially focused on the calm of contemplation from a balcony, it transitions to imagining the disturbance of this calm. Significantly, the disruption begins as a personal annoyance, the calm broken by the noise of a happy child, which then quickly degenerates into the disturbance of a honking horn. Then, the passage abruptly transitions from the individual to the collective. It describes how “life in this country” dehumanizes individuals, tearing their bodies out of their skin.
and transforming them into fanged animals. Finally, the passage moves even further into abstraction as it introduces the third-person plural *hum* (they), who are free to harass, fight, scream, and perform acts of violence on others. As the language becomes increasingly tense, the narrator’s anxiety and frustration become more tangible. Just as the tension reaches its peak, the narrator interrupts it by wondering why Koko, the Sri Lankan domestic worker who sometimes works in the narrator’s home, has not yet emerged from the building. The mundane ordinary resurfaces almost immediately. The paragraph’s language forces the narrator and the reader back into the realm of the mundane.

**Precarity and Everyday Anxieties**

The novels’ reassertion of the mundane performs resilience in the face of violence and trauma. But, as their characters encounter other aspects of everyday life in Beirut, the novels create a textually uncontainable anxiety that looms over the unstable present and the unknown future. This performance and articulation of uncontainable affective responses to the urban landscape emphasizes the high emotional stakes of urban belonging. The city’s rapid—some might say rabid—development makes these stakes particularly acute by producing new anxieties about socioeconomic displacement. Uncontainable affective responses impress the urgency of Beirut’s lived present.63 By noticing the distinction between what can and cannot be made ordinary, we sense which crises are felt more urgently.

In their recent work, urban scholars AbdouMaliq Simone and Hannah Schilling expand the definition of precarity, usually associated with socioeconomically disadvantaged populations, to include middle-class urban youth.64 The novels’ descriptions of seeking and finding housing emphasize this middle-class precarity of everyday life in contemporary Beirut. Like their counterparts in other global cities under neoliberal economic regimes, the novels’ young characters live in a state of instability. While their jobs attest to their high levels of education, education does not automatically allow them access to comfortable living or secure housing. 32 engages the high cost of urban living by describing finding an apartment in Hamra as a personal victory “against those who want to evict me, and those like me, from the young middle classes, from Hamra.”65
The precarity of living in Beirut is not merely the outcome of ongoing violence, trauma, or war. Rather, it is the outcome of uneven development and the growing difficulty of sustainable living, even for those who wield relatively high social capital.66 The three novels do not necessarily take an identical stance against Beirut’s rapid and haphazard urbanization. But because they are all situated squarely within the hyper-local neighborhood of Ras Beirut, the novels call attention to a rapidly transforming everyday urban landscape and its affective effects on people’s lives. For example, although Beirut’s off-the-charts loudness enervates Haitham, he responds positively to the “din of continuous change that has overtaken the area in the past few years, whose pace has gotten faster over the last months.”67 Yet even his enjoyment of the hubbub of construction is affected by the fact that “he hates that shoe shops are multiplying, and rushes past their glass displays every time he passes one. But shoes will not lead him to boycott his favorite street.”68 His distaste will not alter his routine, but he rushes past the shops as a minor defiance, rather than walk slowly by in the manner of a flaneur. In 32, the narrator’s relationship to urban development is even more visceral. Construction in the area physically oppresses and assaults her: “This building has been under construction for years, and I still can’t stand it. It’s as if its concrete had been poured right on top of me.”69 Urban development creates negative affect and negative physical responses in the form of dislike, discomfort, and displeasure.

Of course, the novels’ focus on Beirut is not unique to this generation of writers. Approaching the topic from different angles, Samira Aghacy and I have each shown how authors use Beirut as the stage for articulating anxieties about identity and belonging.70 What distinguishes these novels from their literary predecessors and some of their contemporaries is their focus on Beirut’s present and studied disengagement with its past. Unlike Rabee Jaber’s Mehlis Report, written in the aftermath of Hariri’s murder, 32, Limbo, and Napolitana express no interest in tracing the historical connections between the civil war and the present. Also, by setting their novels in Hamra, the authors disengage from postwar debates about Hariri’s Solidere company and the city center’s reconstruction. Memory discourses often overdetermine these debates. Shifting to Hamra asserts spatially what the authors have asserted literarily: it may be time for Lebanese writing to rethink its tropes and traditions.71
These discussions of economic precarity highlight the novels’ sensitivity to the challenges faced by young people in Beirut today. In 2014, the Lebanese daily *al-Nahar* reported that Beirut was the most expensive Arab city to live in. The article indicates that transportation, services, and entertainment in Beirut are more expensive than in New York City. In these novels, characters fret over being able to afford daily life. Their precarity produces an affective response. Rather than the flattening prose of what I have called “making ordinary,” which Chouman and Mandour use to defuse and neutralize anxiety over violence and traumatic events, they switch discursive tactics to tackle precarity. They use sardonic humor to engage with the situation, as in this passage from *Napolitana*:

The best thing about his apartment—despite the damp and its small size and the lack of an elevator and the fact that the some of the stairs leading to his apartment are broken and stupidity of the building supervisor (*al-natur*) Ibrahim—is its low rent (*ijarha ghayr al-murtafi‘*) and its location near the American University and the Corniche. Juxtaposing a long list of defects and problems with the apartment against the phrase “the best thing about,” Chouman playfully emphasizes the compromises that Haitham must make in order to live in a desirable location. Moreover, the adjective he uses is a negation. The apartment’s rent is most accurately translated not as low, but as “not high.” Chouman thus sarcastically situates the economic reality of apartment living in Beirut.

In 32, the narrator describes her search for an affordable apartment in Hamra as an almost quixotic quest. After many disappointments, she finally succeeds when her “Robin Hood cousin”—note the notions of economic justice embedded into this metaphor—finds her an apartment. Unfortunately, this desirably located home has its shortcomings: “I know that living within a family environment is not an ambition, but the status quo (*al-amr al-waqi‘*) rules over me, and I submitted to it. They also promised not to raise the rent along with all the other insane rises in costs taking over Beirut this summer.” Opening with the phrase *a‘rif* (I know), Mandour frames the passage like a confessional, which then moves to verbs of submission and defeat. Mandour’s choice of verbs emphasizes the utter lack of agency in this decision. The desire to live in Beirut, these novels suggest, forces one to make heavy concessions in the structure and
content of living arrangements, such as living with a conservative family that threatens to monitor her every move.

While precarity and the difficulties that educated youth face in finding stable work and housing may be global problems, 32 highlights aspects of apartment hunting that are unique to Beirut. These details enable a critique of Lebanon’s sectarian structure and how it is articulated and lived in the everyday. “Usually, the promise not to raise rent doesn’t emerge from the property owner renting under the new rent laws. . . . But I think their sectarian reasons won out over their economic reasons, so they made me this promise. This time, sectarianism worked in my favor—I fear for the future of the country (al-balad)!” The passage deftly and humorously embeds the individual search for an apartment in the city within very local concerns. These concerns include the new, deeply contested rent laws, which privilege landlords over tenants, and, more emphatically, the sectarian system that governs every visible and invisible aspect of Lebanese life.

Yet, as 32 dissects the absurdity of the sectarian present, it also introduces a new emotional turbulence: fear for Lebanon’s future if the status quo continues. Precarity is always present-focused and future-oriented, and experienced as anxiety, fear, or worry. An underlying restlessness about the present and concern about the future emerges from the texts, even as they attempt to minimize these anxieties and concerns by deploying humor. A reading sensitive to the affects embedded in engaging the ordinary sheds light on the different formal strategies of coping with, and trying to understand, the present.

Conclusion

In 1986, South African scholar Njabulo Ndebele noticed a new phenomenon in the writings of the late apartheid era. He described it as fiction’s “rediscovery of the ordinary,” and argued that this emergent writing captured “the details and complexities of everyday life and private interiority” that earlier narratives had obliterated with an emphasis on the spectacular. Ndebele’s insight resonates with scholarship on violence and resilience. This scholarship notes that although violence’s spectacularity often obscures the mundane, no society enduring violence can be understood without examining the ordinary. Mandour and Chouman’s emergent Lebanese fiction
uses the ordinary as the prism through which they try to articulate what is happening in Lebanon today and pivot away from the past.

But why does this matter? As Lauren Berlant emphatically states, we cannot understand the political without understanding the present, and we can only understand the present if we are sensitive to the way emergent artistic genres render it. In the maelstrom of events across the Middle East since 2011, critics and scholars have put new literary engagements with the political under renewed scrutiny. Although less overtly political than the protest novel, I argue that Mandour and Chouman’s literary intervention is a political one, similar to that of their counterparts across the Arab world. Beirut was not the same city in the 1990s as it was in the early 2000s, nor a decade later. Making ordinary is a way for these novels to call attention to the nuances of multiple temporal moments in the life of the city and its inhabitants and to their shifting needs and desires. Desires for the ordinary are always about the hope for a better life. In post-postwar Beirut, the everyday is becoming the way to scrutinize the present with an eye to a future good life, as elusive as that may be.
ENDNOTES

1 Sahar Mandour, 32 (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2011), 88. All translations are my own.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 130.
4 For a theorization, see Veena Das, Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Harry Harootunian expands the theorization to include societies that have endured cataclysms other than conflict, such as natural disasters, in History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
5 Felix Lang describes the civil war as the “gateway” to literary legitimacy in Lebanon and abroad, and summarizes postwar memory discourses. Felix Lang, The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma, and Capital (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 131.
7 Mandour, 32, 122.
8 In a forthcoming article entitled “Writing Our Stories of Beirut, Re-writing Theirs: Parody in 32 and Always Coca-Cola,” I highlight the way in which 32 uses parody to critique the dominant forms of writing about Lebanon.
9 Hilal Chouman, Limbo Beirut (Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 2013). I will refer to this novel as Limbo in the rest of the article.
10 Ibid., 213.
13 Ibid.
15 Hilal Chouman, Napolitana (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2010).
16 As scholars of the genre point out, in graphic novels text and image must work in tandem to produce meaning. Image and text are usually balanced. In Limbo, the images are more straightforward illustrations of the text and the text far outbalances the images. See Scott McCloud, Understanding Comics (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004).
17 The March 14 leadership is an aggregate of political groups including Sa’d al-Hariri’s Future Movement, Walid Jumblatt’s Progressive Socialist Party, the Phalangist party, and the Lebanese Forces. The March 8 coalition consists of Hizballah, the Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party. In 2005, March 14 opposed Syria and March 8 supported it. The movements’ names derive from the days in which they protested and praised the Syrian presence in Lebanon, respectively. Following the 2005 Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, increasing polarization and sectarian (mostly Sunni-Shi’i) tensions, exacerbated by the summer 2006 Israeli war, culminated in armed violence in May 2008. That year, a truce was negotiated in Doha, Qatar, which led to the formation of a paralyzed and ineffectual national unity government. This government remains in place, more or less, today.
18 The novel’s structure brings to mind Raymond Williams’ point that novels of the city work by bringing together disparate characters and elements and events. Raymond Williams,


Ibid., 199.

For an in-depth discussion of these changes in a variety of sectors, see Michael Kerr and Are Knudsen, eds., *Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).


Although there is a philosophical distinction between affect and emotion, for this article’s purposes the terms are indistinguishable. For more, see the introduction to Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1-23.

Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1-22.


Mandour, 32, 62.


Hayek, *Beirut*, 166-98.

Ibn Zaydun’s *Adha al-Tana’i*, about the end of a love affair.

He leaves after possibly sexually assaulting an awake, unresponsive Yumna. Chouman, *Napolitana*, 139.


One exception is Maroun Baghdadi’s 1982 film *Hurub Saghira* in which the pampered, privileged scion of a wealthy family becomes the head of a militia when his father is kidnapped.


Ibid.

Ibid., 106.

Seigneurie, *Standing*.

Hayek, *Beirut*. 
In Arabic, as in French, the male singular is the universal.

Mandour, 32, 106.

A good discussion of this complexity can be found in Timothy Bewes, "Introduction: Temporalizing the Present," Novel 45, no. 2 (2012), 159-164.


Stewart, Ordinary Affects, 4.

Mandour, 32, 90.

Mandour is half Egyptian. In the novel, some of the characters, like Shwikar, are named after famous actresses from the golden age of Egyptian cinema.

Stewart, Ordinary Affects, 4.

The notion of war yet to come is from Hiba Bou Akar’s work. See Hiba Bou Akar, Planning for the War Yet to Come (forthcoming). Sami Hermez also describes this phenomenon in “‘The War Is Going to Ignite’: On the Anticipation of Violence in Lebanon,” Political and Legal Anthropology Review 35, no. 2 (2012), 327-44.

Chouman, Napolitana, 66.

Due to space considerations, I do not parse here the difference between recovery and resilience. Both are directly correlated with the ability to regain the routines of ordinary life following trauma. Psychologist Judith Herman asserts that the last stage of trauma recovery is “taking part in the customary, the commonplace, the ordinary, and the everyday.” Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 236. Psychologist George Bonnano notes that resilience is a far more ordinary response than trauma to an upsetting event, but (again) that most scholarship focuses on the spectacular rather than the ordinary. George Bonanno, “Resilience in the Face of Potential Trauma,” Current Directions in Psychological Science 14, no. 3 (2005).

Chouman, Napolitana, 94.

Chouman, Limbo, 231.

Mandour, 32, 10.

Ibid., 35.

Ibid., 10.

Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 4.

AbdouMaliq Simone and Hannah Schilling, “Practices within Precarity: Youth, Informality, and Life Making in the Contemporary City” (paper presented at the RC21 International Conference, Urbino, Italy, August 2015).

Mandour, 32, 116.

32’s narrator and Napolitana’s Haitham both work in libraries: the national library and the American University of Beirut’s Jafet library, respectively. The only character in these novels who can be described as working-class is the former militiaman in Limbo Beirut. Social critiques emerge in these novels indirectly, such as in Mandour’s observations of the way people treat the poor and disenfranchised, such as domestic workers or street vendors, or in Chouman’s oblique references to the growing securitization of the city. But the texts remain more or less focused on the concerns and anxieties of their middle-class protagonists.

Chouman, Napolitana, 62.

Ibid.

Mandour, 32, 47.

Hayek, Beirut; and Aghacy, Writing Beirut.
Another text that I could also place within this trend is Alexandra Chreiteh’s *Always Coca-Cola*. For more on this text, see Aghacy, *Writing Beirut*.


Ibid.


Mandour, 32, 116.


Maya Mikdashi has written extensively on the subject of sectarianism in Lebanon, especially as it relates to the constitution of the Lebanese citizen vis-à-vis the state. Maya Mikdashi, “Sex and Sectarianism: The Legal Architecture of Lebanese Citizenship,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 34, no. 2 (2014), 279-93.


See Berlant, *Cruel*, 1-22; and Kelly, “Attractions of Accountancy.”