

KALIMAT



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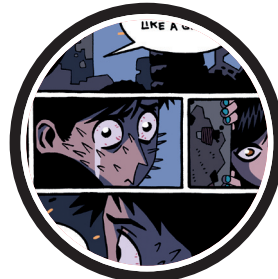
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abuse them. They must cast a critical eye onto the more subtle and less overtly bigoted acts that they engage in everyday and which have helped foster an environment where, for some, the sexual, physical and emotional abuse or even murder of a migrant worker is seen as a morally acceptable act, or worse, a justifiable right.

At a dinner party my parents once hosted, one of the guests kept encouraging an overstuffed room to polish off the desserts. “*Haram*,” (it’s not right) she wined, “if you don’t finish them they are going to go to the maids! Imagine all of these expensive desserts getting eaten by the help. *What a waste of good food.*” According to this woman, the same ‘help,’ who had just served her dessert, who had been in the kitchen with my mother all day chopping, sautéing and mincing various ingredients, who were going to spend hours scrubbing tons of dishes and sweeping up crumbs hours after the guests went home and comfortably tucked themselves into bed, were not deserving of some leftover dessert. To her, it seemed, sharing what was left of some half-eaten cakes and pies with *them* was as wasteful as tossing food in the trash.

She spoke so casually. Her tone implied that she believed what she was saying was commonsensical, considerate of my mother, charming even. None of the guests looked surprised, none of them scolded her, not one person dropped (or even loosened) a jaw or raised a disapproving eyebrow. One guest giggled in that, “oh you,” sort of way. The obese, naked, racist elephant in the room sat on top of those desserts, suffocating the cream puffs with his offensive body weight, and nobody seemed to notice.

We Lebanese are loose-tongued. We are also a society so thoroughly poisoned by sectarianism that it has affected not only how we perceive our own countrymen, but other cultures, religions and nationalities as well. It is not just domestic helpers that we treat like mass produced goods with a set of fixed ingredients, nutritional benefits and warnings printed on the label that we can keep neatly filed away in our brain for reference when we are shopping for new help, for excuses and justifications when we are yelling at or beating the ones we employ, for humour or comic relief when we are trying to lighten a mood or people please. So many of us Lebanese seem incapable of perceiving people through the lens of individuality, personal narratives and idiosyncrasies - like that ability just wasn’t programmed into our wiring. We see only labels through which every habit, tick, decision and belief can be simplistically explained. “That man stole from you? Where is he from, Egypt? That explains it. All Egyptians are thieves...Never marry a Palestinian man dear, their mothers are notoriously impossible to handle...I’m sure he couldn’t help himself, she’s Moroccan! They can seduce the finest men into cheating.”

Sectarianism, after all, is not merely an ‘ideology.’ It is a practice and a way of life, a means of approaching and absorbing the world and others. Every individual, within the logic of this framework, is either tainted or blessed by his or her nationality, religion or culture, which is

passed on through umbilical chords damp with the blood of kinship. His or her potential for action and thought, the decisions he or she is capable of making, the desires, impulses and fears that will invade his or her body over the years, all have primordial roots in the soil of inherited identity, it is believed. There is no context, no conditions or circumstances that enable actions and complicate our judgments and opinions of others. Whether one is repugnant or magnificent, dismissible or imitable, has already been predetermined within this worldview.

Racism, it seems, is a part of Lebanese subjectivity, accidentally cultivated through decades of the dedicated practice of sectarianism, which saturated its designated pocket within our minds and bodies and seeped into the rims through which we perceive other peoples. Tougher consequences for crimes committed against domestic workers, laws against hate speech, and tighter surveillance, while necessarily to protect the abused, are not enough to prevent the kinds of horrifying acts that have been piercing our already deflated socio-cultural bubble. As a society, we must critically examine the words we speak, the jokes we make, and the tone we use in relation to foreigners and think about how they are helping to cultivate an environment in which mentally, physically and sexually abusing domestic helpers, cramming Palestinians into refugee camps like cattle, dismissing Syrian refugees in need of shelter and medical assistance, and preventing Lebanese women married to foreign men from passing on their nationality to their children, are not seen as violent acts. We must question the kind of subjectivities we are enabling the cultivation of in Lebanon through our unchallenged habits, and the potentially dangerous actions these subjectivities will be capable of as a result of a collectively fostered environment of normalised, casual racism.



WITH A BEAUTIFUL BOARDWALK, SPRAWLING OUTDOOR RESTAURANTS AND UPSCALE RETAIL, BEIRUT’S NEW WATERFRONT, ZAITUNAY BAY, HAS BECOME THE BUZZ OF THE CAPITAL. BUT WHO IS IT FOR?

Never in a million Cedar Revolutions did Joey Ghazal think he would move to Lebanon.

After spending much of his childhood in Dubai where his father worked, he returned to his birthplace of Montreal to “grow up”—that is, become a young professional. By 32, he had worked his way up the restaurant food chain, where he began at 17, to the marketing director of one Montreal’s most successful hospitality

groups, Morentzos.

But it all changed when he got the news that his father, who had since retired in his native Lebanon, was seriously ill. Missing what could be his father’s last days didn’t even cross his mind. He gave his landlord notice, found his dog a new home, kissed his mother goodbye and left for Rafic Hariri International Airport.

Shortly thereafter, his father passed away. That was 2009 and Joey is still there, in

Beirut, where he started his own hospitality group in three short years. If you ask him what kept him there, he’ll tell you it was Zaitunay Bay.

He’s referring to the seaside promenade around a G-shaped marina, which boasts beach clubs, designer stores, rentable yachts, scuba and other marine adventures, and outdoor restaurants—two of them his own: St. Elmo’s Seaside Brasserie, which has a specifically nautical and Boston feeling, and Cro Magnon, a high-end



steak house.

Zaitunay Bay looks like a public space—it even feels that way in the openness of the city—but it's not. However, the private property developed by Stow and Solidere (founded by former Lebanese prime minister, the late Rafic Hariri) is managed by the Beirut Waterfront Development to make it also function as a public space, much in the way a shopping mall does, with open areas specifically for cultural events and concerts. Alongside drab cement buildings, the beautified bay and haute hotel towers look like a side of caviar with a BLT sandwich.

Located in the core, Ghazal calls the 215,000-square-foot, six-years-in-the-making Zaitunay Bay “the heartbeat of the city.” It certainly has become the throb of the capital

since opening in December, not in the least because it also offers a blessed relief from its infamous horns and traffic. As Ghazal explained to me via Skype: “Because it's below street level, it gets rid of that noise pollution.”

He lives within walking distance to avoid that same traffic. “I've basically built a little Montreal for myself.” When the posh residential buildings go up and the bay becomes truly mixed-use, he plans on moving into

this little oasis that grew from a former dumping ground. In fact, below the chocolate boardwalk is the Green Line—the invisible yet powerful divide that kept the Christian-controlled East Beirut and Muslim-controlled West Beirut apart during the 1975-1990 civil war. “There's a lot of symbolism,” said Ghazal of Zaitunay Bay, pointing out that one end of the bay is where the “Battle of the Hotels” erupted during the civil war and another end is where Hariri was assassinated by 1,800 kilograms of explosives in 2005.

Zaitunay Bay blossomed against all odds (including but not limited to a heavy recession, teetering parliament and civil strife in the northern city of Tripoli) and bloomed over the last ten months when it opened with a Christmas season market around an illuminated olive tree. But when Ghazal decided to gamble on Beirut, Zaitunay Bay was just one idea in development company Solidere's master plan to redevelop, revitalise and some say re-imagine Beirut. He heard mere murmurs about it from a friend and knew immediately that he wanted in on Beirut's newest dining destination.

“My mother was very against it,” Ghazal recalled. “She famously told me, ‘You may love Lebanon but that doesn't mean Lebanon will love you back.’”

Neither his mother's warnings nor those of the Canadian government (which advises citizens against “non-essential” travel to Lebanon, let alone starting a business) could stop him from seeing the vision that closely resembled the Lebanon his parents left behind before the war. “It's a modern interpretation of those glory days.”

However, some might say that it's a *Khaleeji* (referring to the Gulf region) interpretation of those glory days.

In criticising a *New York Times* article about Zaitunay Bay that was too “fluff” for its own good, journalist and Middle East analyst Nicholas Noe blogged that Zaitunay Bay is for the “1 [per cent] in the [A]rab world” and has a “specifically Gulfie bent which has marred so much of the rehabilitation of downtown.” He asked, “Wouldn't some hint of sadness over this project have made the piece less a travel fluff/advert job?”

Hint of sadness? Last June my wife and I honeymooned in Beirut,

“One indication of that [unwelcomeness] is the extraordinary amount of private security there, designed to intimidate folks that don't look the part.”

and after discovering the bay on our second day, we changed our next day's plans to return. The cocktails were too crisp, the sounds too peaceful and the people watching too amusing. There was simply nothing to frown at. Were we being seduced by the promenade?

I called Noe to find out what journalists and foreigners like me weren't seeing.

“One argument amongst Lebanese,” explained Noe, “is the old downtown, unlike the current, and Zaitunay Bay and Solidere [the retail-heavy central area that was the company's first redevelopment project], used to be open to all the different economic and sectarian factions in Lebanon, the whole melting pot.” He added, “One indication of that [unwelcomeness] is the extraordinary amount of private security there, designed to intimidate folks that don't look the part.”

But Ghazal, who co-founded the Zaitunay Bay Tenants Association for business owners, disagreed. He said it's geared toward the middle class and he has never heard of security discriminating against people. In fact, he joked, “it's the only place where you'll see a woman in a *hijab* (head scarf) looking over some kids drinking at St. Elmo's, while half-naked people walk by.”

I observed the same diversity, but short of checking their bank receipts, I'll never know if there is a true mix of classes.

But amongst the boardwalk and nickel-coloured storefronts, expensive boats and designer outdoor furniture, one thing did stand out to me: at the edge of the bay, a giant vinyl sign screaming “Stop Solidere” hung from the St. George's Hotel, the very place Solidere's founder, prime minister Hariri, was killed. The hotel believes that its private property rights have been infringed upon by Solidere's redevelopment, which often acts like a government body. Perhaps that's because it was founded in 1994 by Hariri, while he was still in his first term.

Some have called Beirut's new downtown “Hariri's Disneyland.” Six years since his unsolved murder, his ghost remains the urban planner of the capital, transforming it into a beatified fantasy. But there's a cost, said Noe. He listed the consequences that shouldn't go unmentioned: “Long-time tenants and property owners losing their rights, getting diluted shares, not getting proper compensation — and a host of steam-rolling [by] Solidere.”

He said Solidere developed Zaitunay Bay, Beirut Souks (a new 1.7 million-square-foot mall)

and the downtown in a way that attracts Khaleeljis. Indeed, the nouveau design by Steven Holl Architects does look like it belongs more in the Emirates than the Mediterranean. “One of the main, publicly stated missions of Solidere and of the government's tourism and development strategy has been to attract Gulf Arabs, primarily because they are extraordinarily wealthy, they spend a lot in Lebanon, they're Muslim, they're Arab — so it's been a long-standing target.” He added, “That desire really over-determined the design

of the downtown redevelopment,” pointing to the Souks' Spanish architectural plan being super-sized at last minute “to feel like a Dubai shopping mall.”

But Noe also said there's another way to look at it, that it's a smart strategy, that it “benefits the whole country and it was the most reasonable path forward for redevelopment under the difficult circumstances.”

Neither Noe nor I are alone in our observations that Zaitunay Bay and Solidere's other projects have been *Khaleeji*-fied. On Skyscraper Cities, an Internet forum for urban development discourse, a heated thread is eight pages long and counting (which I've edited for easier reading).

“It just saddens me how downtown Beirut was full of life back then, while now it's like a ghost town except for a couple of months where you see *Khaleejis* smoking narghile and that's about it,” started one user.

Another retorted whether he or she really wants Martyrs Square, the civic square, “to turn into the Cola Intersection,” a gritty hub for busses transporting everyone *but* the wealthy through Lebanon.

When a third person insulted the Gulf tourists, a fourth chimed in: “LOL ... biting the



hand that's feeding us, are we?”

Ghazal disagreed with this sentiment. “A lot of people here will say that the Souks is not for the Lebanese,” he said, “but Zaitunay Bay is.” Although he stops short of calling Zaitunay Bay a public space (“it's more of a dining destination right now”), he said that it's a place to see and be seen—“a very Lebanese attitude.” In that sense, maybe the bay is a restoration of the so-called Glory Days, when Western observers were enamoured by the flash and flair of Beirutis.

As a member of the Lebanese diaspora, that's a sentiment I can agree with. But it's hard for me—a citizen on paper but not at heart—to say who it's for, not in the least because the summer that I was there was the summer the *Khaleejis* didn't show up. Ironically, their governments warned against travelling to Lebanon given the conditions in Syria which have practically plugged up the only remaining open border and threaten to spill over. Others say it's a punishment against Lebanon's support of the Assad government. This absence has turned Solidere, at some hours, into a ghost town secured by machine guns.

But Zaitunay Bay? At least for now, it remains full of life.